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THE NEW REPUBLIC

SPECIAL ISSUE

July/August 2023

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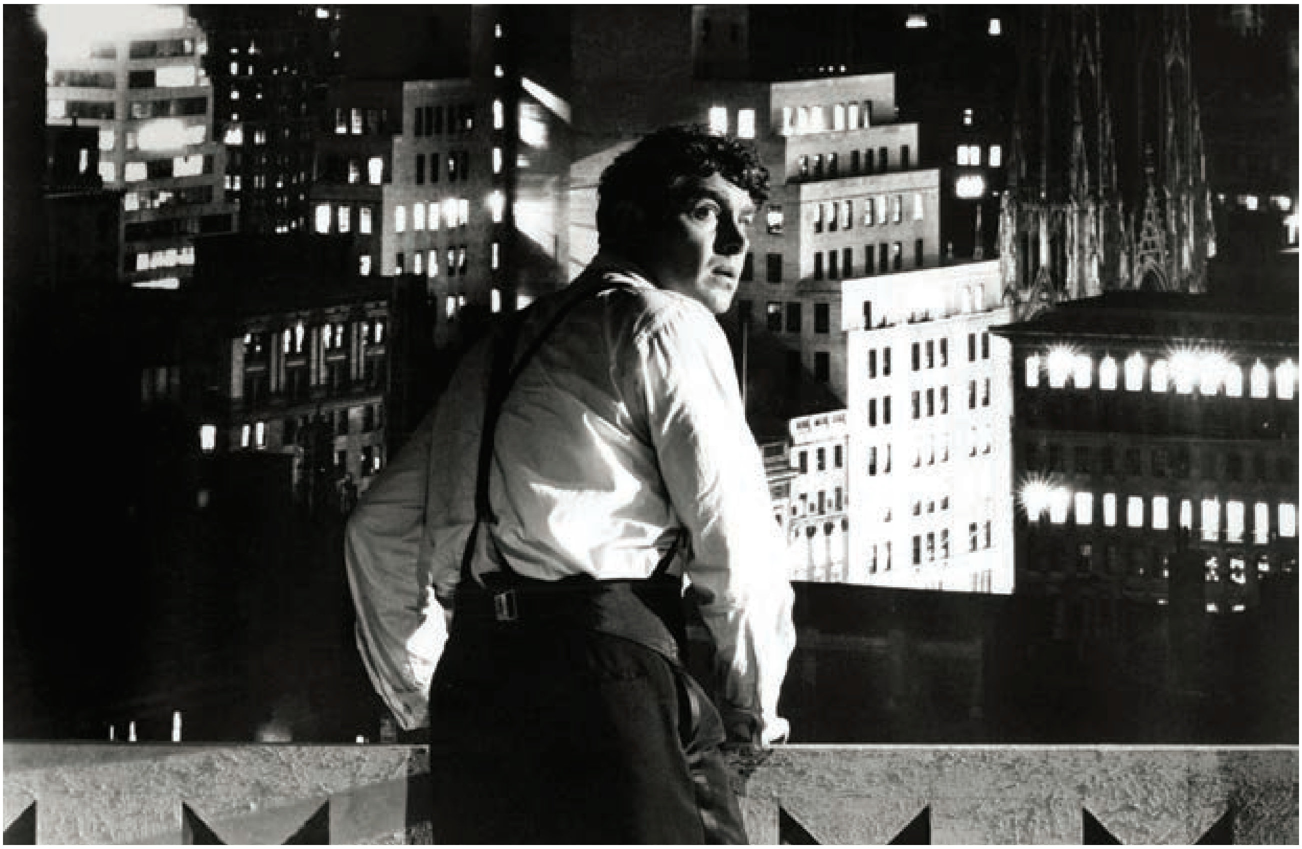

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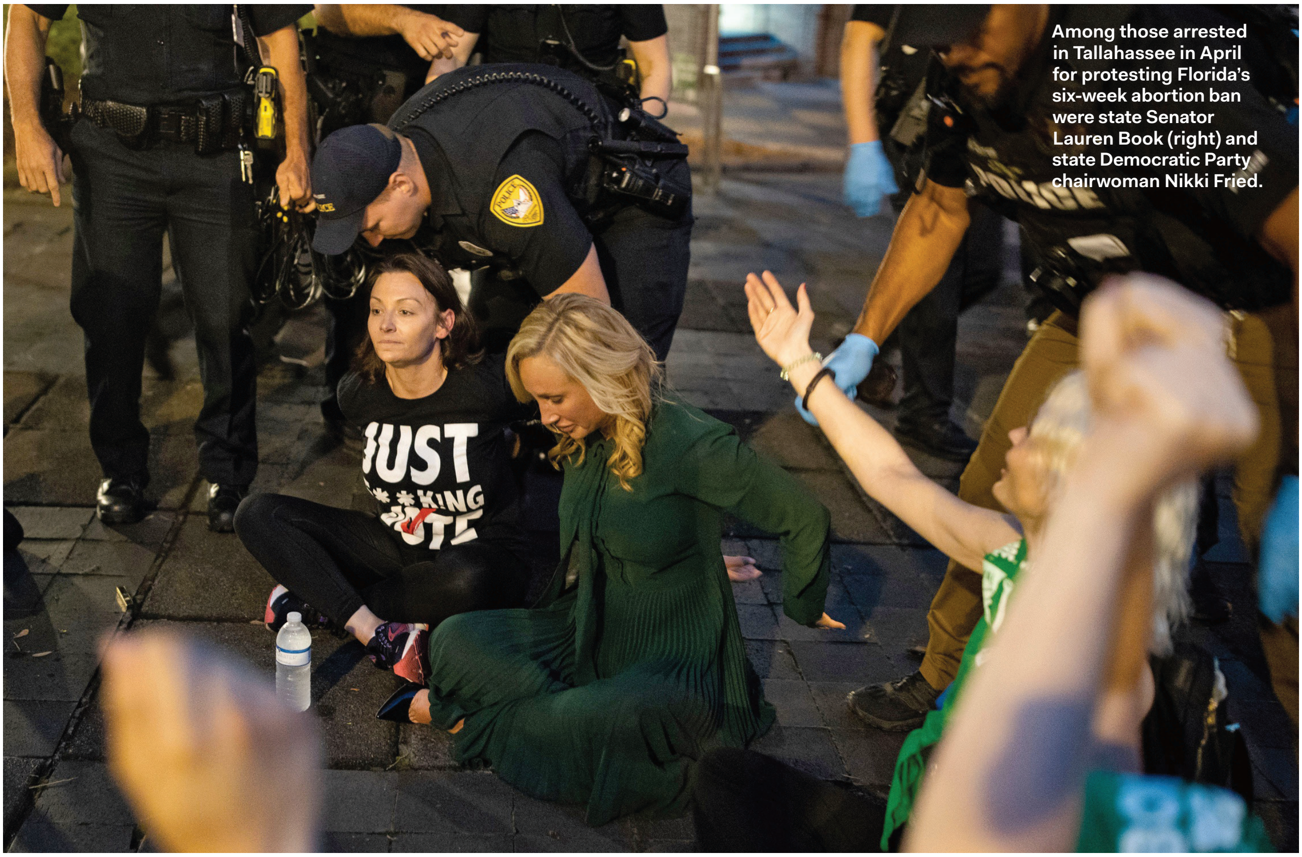
STATE OF THE NATION



Among those arrested in Tallahassee in April for protesting Florida's six-week abortion ban were state Senator Lauren Book (right) and state Democratic Party chairwoman Nikki Fried.

Don't Be Fooled

A year after *Dobbs*, extreme restrictions on abortion are commonplace in many states, while Republicans pretend they're not really pushing for a nationwide ban.

By Melissa Gira Grant

IN THE 12 MONTHS since the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade*, Republican legislators across the country have devoted themselves to advancing draconian, unpopular abortion bans. One popular media narrative portrays these extreme bans as a liability for the party—a "runaway train" provoking "political backlash." When the bans fail, they are cast as "a reflection of the growing unease among Republicans over the political popularity of strict bans." National Republicans, meanwhile, are said to be backing away from these extreme bans: Even Trump, some coverage claims, won't back a federal ban (earning him the ire of anti-abortion groups).

This is a reassuring narrative. But it doesn't hold up to scrutiny: When you look closely at which abortion bans are described as extreme and which bans are called compromises, it's clear that if the Republican Party is backing away from near-total abortion bans, it is proudly supporting bans with only minor allowances. Both the anti-abortion judges that Republican presidents have put on the courts and Republicans' tolerance for extremists suggest a party ready to steamroll over any dissent: Whether abortion bans are popular or not, Republicans are counting on getting their way.

ALICIA DEVINE/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN

Although some GOP presidential candidates, like Trump, won't say whether they personally would back a federal abortion ban, it would be dangerous to presume that's a political calculation due to broad support for abortion access—or that this reticence will last. The idea of a federal ban was unthinkable until very recently. That we are considering this question is a sign of how thoroughly anti-abortion groups have gained ground for even unpopular abortion laws since the *Dobbs* decision.

For instance, when Senator Lindsey Graham introduced his 15-week federal ban in the Senate last September, what pushback the ban got from Republicans was disingenuous and self-serving. Some positioned the push for a national ban as problematic because it compromised their already dubious talking point after *Dobbs* that abortion is a matter left to the states. Some in the party fretted that it would draw voters' attention back to abortion generally and harm them at the ballot box. There was little to no pushback at the idea that 15 weeks was too extreme to support. This makes it all the more bizarre that 15-week bans are now being characterized by the media as a retreat from extremism. (On a conservative radio show in April, Wisconsin Republican Representative Derrick Van Orden suggested this would be a compromise with "radical" Democrats.) Either way, such claims of moderation serve the interest of both the Republican Party and the anti-abortion movement.

Then there's the tactic of saying a federal ban is "unrealistic," as Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley did in her "Consensus on Abortion" speech in April at the Susan B. Anthony List headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. Haley wasn't saying she didn't support a federal ban because it was too extreme, but because the Senate lacked the votes. Contrary to what was said by "fearmongers," Haley added, "No Republican president will have the ability to ban abortion nationwide, just as no Democratic president can override the laws of all 50 states." Is this supposed to signal a willingness to compromise?

There's no getting around the fact that, as governor of South Carolina, Haley backed the kind of abortion ban that once inspired thousands of protesters to occupy state legislatures. In her April speech, Haley proudly recalled voting for "every pro-life bill" that crossed her desk as state representative and signing a 20-week ban as governor. Does 20 weeks sound moderate? When Texas state Senators Wendy Davis and Leticia Van de Putte filibustered a proposed abortion ban 10 years ago, gaining national attention for this dramatic 13-hour standoff, what led protesters to pack the massive Capitol rotunda in Austin was a 20-week abortion ban.

WHEN REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES and other elected officials make statements about not supporting a federal ban, that's typically because the post-*Roe* talking point they are supposed to be adhering to is to leave abortion to the states. So let's look at the states.

One unquestionably strict law is West Virginia's near-total abortion ban, passed shortly after *Roe* was overturned. This ban requires that a rape is reported to police within 48 hours to qualify for a rape exception, and was designed to shut down the one abortion-providing clinic in the state. It reportedly passed, as *The Washington Post* put it, "only after moderates pushed to eliminate any criminal penalties for doctors." Is preferring not to jail doctors considered an exclusively "moderate" position now?

In North Carolina, Republicans considering exceptions to a 12-week ban for rape and incest were said to be finding "middle ground," in a bill described as "not nearly as severe as bans that have been embraced by conservative states." In fact, calling it a 12-week ban can be misleading: While surgical abortions are banned at 12 weeks, medication abortion in North Carolina is banned at 10 weeks. On top of that, for medication abortion, the law mandates two to three separate in-person appointments with a provider, with a 72-hour waiting period between each appointment.

To state the obvious, you can only characterize North Carolina's bill as "not nearly as severe" because of how popular these near-total bans have become among Republican legislators, including very new ones. Despite Democratic Governor Roy Cooper's veto of the ban, the legislature was able to override him with a single vote from a Republican state representative, Tricia Cotham, who as recently as April was a Democrat who ran on defending abortion rights. "Now more than ever we need leaders who will be unwavering and unapologetic in their support of abortion rights," Cotham said in May 2022 on Twitter, pledging that in the state legislature she'd "fight to codify *Roe*."

Not only did Cotham abandon that pledge; when she became a Republican, she gave GOP members of the state's General Assembly a veto-proof majority and on May 16 voted with her new party to overrule the governor's veto. The ban is due to go into effect July 1.

NEVER FORGET

A brief look back at the chaos of Donald Trump's White House at this time five years ago.

TRAGEDY

In July, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, Trump nominated Federalist Society farm-club prospect Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court to replace Anthony Kennedy, the court's consistent swing vote. Despite congressional testimony from Christine Blasey Ford that he'd sexually assaulted her while they were both in high school, Kavanaugh was confirmed by the Senate, 50–48.

FARCE

On July 5, Trump announced via Twitter that Scott Pruitt was resigning as head of the EPA, apparently due to "unrelenting attacks" on him and his family. Pruitt faced a flurry of investigations for, among other things, installing a $43,000 soundproof phone booth in his office. Under his tenure, the agency scrubbed climate change resources from its climate website, rolled back environmental regulations, and stood by Trump's proposal to cut its own budget by 31 percent. "Incredible that he lasted as long as he did," one EPA official told CNN. Trump replaced Pruitt with Andrew Wheeler, a former coal lobbyist.

FASCIST

During a rant against the media at a veterans association address in late July, Trump said, "What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening." Days earlier, he had repeated his claim that the press was "the enemy of the people." Trump's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, added to the doublethink a few weeks later, explaining to NBC's Chuck Todd why he wouldn't let his client testify before special counsel Robert Mueller: "Truth isn't truth!" —*Indigo Olivier*

WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY (KAVANAUGH); CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY (GIULIANI)

Then there's South Carolina, where a near-total ban was introduced this session. When the state's five women senators joined to filibuster the ban, they were hailed for protecting abortion from severe bans, and their effort was reported as evidence of the "failure" of "strict" laws to advance in even conservative states. Yet despite their headline-grabbing filibuster in late April against the near-total ban, two of those senators also voted for a six-week ban—effectively a near-total ban, since few people know they are pregnant at six weeks. That six-week ban has since passed, been signed, and has been temporarily blocked by a state judge, pending a legal challenge.

Debating weeks and exceptions are a trap, meant to force abortion rights groups to defend laws that they oppose if only to stave off worse ones. As the Carolina Abortion Fund, which provides funding for abortion and associated costs in North and South Carolina, said earlier in the session, "regardless of any week, any exception … any ban against abortion is an extreme outside of the will of the constituency."

The abortion bans in the Carolinas passed the same week Nebraska legislators considered a 12-week abortion ban, merging it with already incredibly contentious legislation on banning gender-affirming care for transgender youth. State Senators Machaela Cavanaugh, Jen Day, and Megan Hunt had filibustered the latter bill all session long, in a rare instance of pushback (made possible in part because of the state's unicameral, nonpartisan legislature).

Some of their colleagues have not tolerated this dissent. Senator Cavanaugh was threatened with censure, and an investigation into Senator Hunt, who has a trans child, was opened over an alleged "conflict of interest." What does it mean, then, that anti-abortion lawmakers thought it made sense to add their new attempt at an abortion ban to the one bill these senators have spent weeks blocking? To circumvent the rules and undermine their opponents—and so on May 19, amid large protests from constituents, whose chants were heard in the chamber, and who were banned from holding signs within view of their elected representatives, the legislature voted to pass the dual abortion and trans care bill. Nebraska's governor signed it into law in late May, though it was immediately challenged in court.

Finally, we come to Florida, where we have a two-for-one example of Republican swagger on the issue: Governor Ron DeSantis signed a six-week abortion ban in April. After declaring his presidential candidacy the following month, DeSantis accused Democrats of "trying to nationalize abortion all the way up until birth." Yet Democratic efforts to codify *Roe* into federal law are stalled out, and, in any case, *Roe* only established the right to abortion before fetal viability, around 24 weeks. In the same interview with Fox, DeSantis called any federal attempt to protect abortion access "an abuse of power."

This stands in stark contrast to his own abuses: his intent to chill the opposition by demanding the prosecution of abortion-rights activists. The door for DeSantis to demand this, significantly, was opened with the Department of Justice's enforcement of the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, a law meant to protect clinics and patients from anti-abortion protesters. Federal prosecutors charged four abortion rights activists with offenses that carry a potential sentence of 12 years in prison. They stand accused of spray-painting pro-abortion slogans on the exterior walls of a fake abortion clinic in South Florida.

In all, 16 states put near-total bans in effect over the course of 2022, according to

WHO SAID IT?

Steve Bannon or Jack Donaghy

The smug cynicism of Jack Donaghy (played by Alec Baldwin) dominated Tina Fey's acerbic send-up of the corporate-entertainment complex, *30 Rock*. Donaghy's attempt at portfolio expansion (transitioning from microwaves to television programming) proved comically disastrous—not unlike the woes of another working-class, Ivy-educated business wunderkind and paragon of self-regard. Steve Bannon at least knew how to build a media giant (the online cesspool Breitbart), but he was practically drop-kicked out of the ultimate C-suite: the White House. See if you can identify which egomaniac's quote is which.

1. "Fear is a good thing. Fear is going to lead you to take action."
2. "The world is made by those who control their own destiny. It isn't made by those who don't do; it's made by those who do do."
3. "There are some unintended consequences of the women's liberation movement. That the women that would lead this country would be pro-family.... They wouldn't be a bunch of dykes that came from Seven Sisters schools up in New England."
4. "Money can't buy happiness; it is happiness."
5. "Diversity is the engine that drives this country. We are an immigrant nation!"
6. "If you rolled out a guillotine, they'd chop off every set of balls in the room."
7. "*The New York Times* is owned by NYT Incorporated, which is owned by Altheon Ballistic Dynamics, which is owned by the Murdoch family, who are owned … by Halliburton."
8. "Human empathy. It's as useless as the Winter Olympics."
9. "Darkness is good … Dick Cheney. Darth Vader. Satan. That's power."

GETTY (X2)

Answers: 1. Bannon 2. Donaghy 3. Bannon 4. Donaghy 5. Donaghy 6. Bannon 7. Donaghy 8. Donaghy 9. Bannon

In April, Nebraska legislators defeated a six-week abortion ban, but in May, a 12-week ban passed after it was amended to a bill limiting gender-affirming care for trans youth.

the Guttmacher Institute, which concludes, “Combined with the implementation of pre-*Roe* laws and trigger bans that had been enacted in previous years, these laws have restricted abortion access for millions of people.” That’s the reality, popularity or political feasibility or number of votes gained or lost be damned: There are millions of people who are denied an abortion in this country already. The people forced to give birth; the people whose doctors are telling them to carry dangerous, wanted pregnancies to term; the people who risk criminalization by requesting packets of mifepristone and misoprostol for medication abortion through the mail—these are all just a preview of what Republicans are working toward.

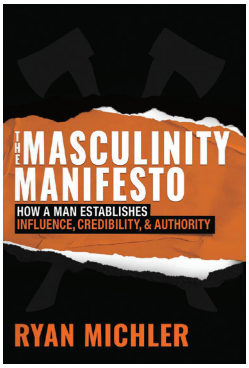
In fact, the definition of “extreme” has narrowed even within the past couple of weeks: At a campaign event in New Hampshire not long after her speech at the Susan B. Anthony List headquarters, Haley announced that, as president, she would in fact back a federal abortion ban should it land on her desk, despite her having earlier said that such a ban was impractical. Haley still draped her promise to sign a federal ban in self-aggrandizing rhetoric, claiming that “no one has been honest” with the voters that such a ban was unlikely to pass Congress—as if competently counting possible votes is what distinguishes her from her Republican rivals.

Remember, too, that for years we were told how “unlikely” overturning *Roe* was—until it was not. As Trump posted on Truth Social, just a few days before Haley’s remarks in New Hampshire, “Without me there would be no 6 weeks, 10 weeks, 15 weeks, or whatever is finally agreed to. Without me the pro Life movement would have just kept losing.” When you’ve already conceded that it is proper for the state to compel people to carry a pregnancy to term using the blunt force of criminal law, weeks are just a bargaining chip in how reproductive coercion will be enforced.

Look how quickly after *Dobbs* we’ve landed in this reality: Extreme restrictions on abortion are now so common that once unthinkable laws can be framed as compromises or even wins. News that some Republicans are unwilling to sign on to near-total bans should not be dignified with the narrative that the party as a whole is backing away from abortion bans. And when national Republicans dodge questions about a federal ban only to say they prefer to leave it to the states, while those states are pushing bans even more extreme than the current federal ban up for debate, we should absolutely interpret such statements as the candidates’ support for these extreme state bans. Finally, while those bans may indeed be unpopular with many voters, it’s worth remembering that states with near-total abortion bans are also some of the most gerrymandered states in the nation. These days, you can be a Republican officeholder who embraces election denialism and not only get reelected but even get a promotion. Voters may say they want their right to an abortion back, but what voters want is no protection against this party’s extremism.

Melissa Gira Grant *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.

SPOT THE FAKE RIGHT-WING BOOK TITLE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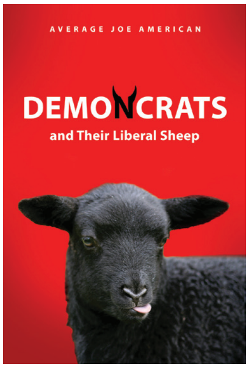
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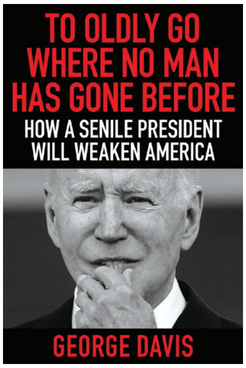
and Their Liberal Sheep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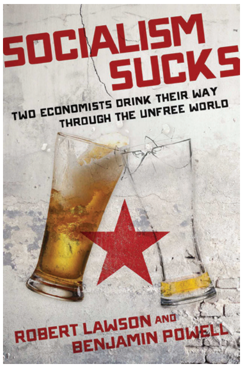
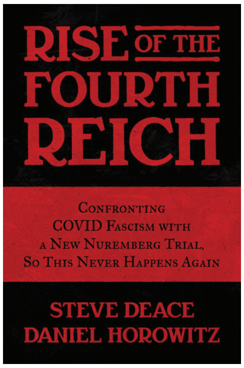

SOCIALISM SUCKS
TWO ECONOMISTS DRINK THEIR WAY THROUGH THE UNFREE WORLD
ROBERT LAWSON AND BENJAMIN POWELL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CONFRONTING COVID FASCISM WITH A NEW NUREMBERG TRIAL, SO THIS NEVER HAPPENS AGAIN
STEVE DEACE
DANIEL HOROWITZ

Answer: *To Oldly Go Where No Man Has Gone Before*

TOP: REBECCA S. GRATZ/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY; GETTY (FAKE BOOK)

Phantom Swingers

There *are* swing voters. Just far fewer of them than conventional wisdom holds.

By Alex Shephard

Illustration by Pete Ryan

AMERICA'S LARGEST, fastest-growing political party isn't led by Joe Biden or Donald Trump. It's the Independent Party. At least, that was one of the biggest takeaways from a Gallup poll this spring. It found that 49 percent of Americans—roughly the same amount as the number of voters who identify as Democrats and Republicans combined—think of themselves as "independents." (An identical poll a month later found slightly less eye-catching numbers.) That's a huge jump from just 20 years ago, when less than a third of respondents identified that way.

But what's going on behind those numbers? Many in the political press jumped on them as the latest evidence of partisanship's negative effects. "We spend our days captivated by people with the most power and the biggest mouths," wrote Axios founder Mike Allen in April. "But it turns out a rising number of Americans want something else—political independence."

"By far the dominant U.S. party isn't Democrats or Republicans," he continued. "It's: 'I'll shop around, thank you.'"

It is true that the rise of independents—and the assumption that a silent majority wants something quite different from what they're being offered by the two—is beginning to have ripple effects. In December, Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema announced she was leaving the Democratic Party to become an independent, hoping voters in her state would recognize and reward a maverick who was as fed up with politics as they were. (She is currently polling behind both the leading Republican and Democratic challengers for her seat.) And then there is No Labels, the centrist political group recently in the news for its "toxic" work environment and its employment, until March, of disgraced pundit Mark Halperin. That organization, which ostensibly exists to push "bipartisan" policies, has been seeking to get itself on the ballot in more than a dozen states. Its ultimate goal is to push a "unity" ticket featuring one Democrat and one Republican—to woo independent voters who hate both parties, of course.

And then there's Andrew Yang, the successful businessman who has run two highly unsuccessful campaigns as a Democrat—one for president in 2020, and another for New York City mayor in 2021—and launched the Forward Party, aimed at wooing the nation's weary voters, last July. "The United States badly needs a new political party—one that reflects the moderate, commonsense majority," Yang and his backers wrote in a manifesto. The party's motto—"Not left. Not right. Forward"—envisions an electorate of tens of millions of Americans who are not Democrats or Republicans but are, instead, shopping around.

Except … that really isn't the case. "The interesting thing about independents is that they do have affiliations to political parties," said University of Michigan political scientist Yanna Krupnikov—who, with the University of Arizona's Samara Klar, literally wrote the book on political independents, 2016's *Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction*. "They typically have a preference, but it's potentially different from the deep-seated attachment that a strong partisan might have. But a large portion of them do seem to prefer one party or the other." Roughly three-quarters of independent voters are known as "leaners"—they typically turn out to vote for one party or the other. Most independents, in other words, aren't so independent.

It's possible that some folks just like *saying* they are independent, whether they really are or not.

Rather, "I think what this reflects is that most Americans have a pretty negative view of the party system in general and of what's happening in our politics," Emory University political scientist Alan Abramowitz told *The New Republic*. "There's a reluctance to openly identify oneself as a partisan and to say, come right out and say, 'I think of myself as a Republican or a Democrat.'"

IT'S ALSO POSSIBLE that some folks just like *saying* they're independent, whether they really are or not. "Consider the word itself. 'Independent' sounds so empowering, so liberating, so … American," noted Daniel de Visé in *The Hill* earlier this year.

Self-described independents and leaners do have one thing in common. "Even among people who identify with a political party … the trend is in their disdain for the other party," said Matt Grossmann, director of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, or IPPSR, and professor of political science at Michigan State University. "That is actually especially true of leaners, that they don't have a strong positive feeling about the party that they lean toward; they just have a negative feeling about the party that they lean against."

Indeed, more than 60 percent of independents who lean Republican or lean Democrat have "very" or "somewhat" cold opinions of the other party, according to a 2017 Pew Research poll. These voters typically end up voting for Democrats and Republicans simply to ensure the party they detest more isn't in power. "You might have many people who are willing to show up and vote, but they're not going to encourage others to do so," Krupnikov said. "They're doing it in a way where they're trying to avoid seeing the lesser of two evils, which in some sense is a sad choice to have: You're dissatisfied with everything."

In other words, it's negative partisanship, an increasingly powerful part of American politics over the last 40 years. In 1980, the average Democrat and Republican thought that the other party was basically fine; in the four decades since, those feelings have evaporated.

Writing in FiveThirtyEight in 2020, New America's Lee Drutman made the case that several interlocking factors have contributed to the mushrooming negative partisanship. "The first is the steady nationalization

of American politics," he wrote. "The second is the sorting of Democrats and Republicans along urban/rural and culturally liberal/culturally conservative lines, and the third is the increasingly narrow margins in national elections."

Many see the acrimony and bickering that defines much of American politics as a result of these trends and simply want to withdraw. "Sometimes socially it's easier to say that you're independent or apolitical because it gets you out of jams—you don't have to talk politics," Krupnikov said. "This is an important aspect of this, especially as politics become more and more contentious. Some people want to pull themselves out of that particular context."

To be clear, there are some genuine independent voters out there—a minority of independent identifiers who really do flip between parties from election to election. And some leaners are partisans without a party. Some are independent because they're very conservative and don't believe the Republican Party is conservative enough, or they're very liberal and don't believe that the Democratic Party is truly progressive. "There still are true independents in the middle, and they're just people who really don't pay much attention to politics," Grossmann said. "If they vote, [they] don't tend to make up their mind until late in the process." And the numbers of swing voters are not increasing, said Grossmann. "Where you're seeing the increase is in these folks who do know kind of what side they're on but don't want to say it."

Many of these voters have expressed a desire to vote for a third party. In 2022, Pew Research found that 43 percent of surveyed voters disagreed with the assertion, "I usually feel there is at least one candidate who shares most of my views," up from 36 percent four years earlier. Nearly half of independents—and 38 percent of Democrats and just 21 percent of Republicans—strongly agreed with the statement, "I wish there were more political parties to choose from in this country." There are, however, reasons to suspect a third party aimed at hoovering up independents would fail. For one, the United States has been a political duopoly for more than a century, and there are no signs of disruption. For another, frustration with the political system is the one thing most independents share. Aside from that, there are few indications that these people represent a true coalition that could viably compete with the two entrenched parties: Contra the assumptions of Andrew Yang and No Labels, it's wrong to imagine that the vast majority are "centrists."

Meanwhile, negative partisanship has dramatically changed the tenor of U.S. political campaigns over the last four decades. Rather than pitches to persuade voters—and again, who knows how many persuadables really exist—the campaigns are built around constant reminders that the other guy is worse. Much, much worse.

This will likely be truer than ever in 2024. Both Biden and Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, are "unpopular." The goal of the campaigns will not be to convince voters that each candidate's policy platform is best, or that he has the temperament to run the nation, but to convince them that the other guy is corrupt and crazed. Biden will likely (rightfully) lean on the fact that his opponent is a delusional authoritarian who wants to suspend the Constitution and install himself as a dictator; Trump will likely respond by claiming that his opponent is simultaneously senile and overseeing a vast conspiracy to enrich himself and his family at the expense of the nation. And voters—independents as much as nonindependents—will respond, because that's simply how powerful negative partisanship is.

Regardless, the idea that these voters are a secret army of moderates waiting to be unlocked by a centrist party is likely a myth. Many do think the parties are too extreme; certainly most believe that they're too disputatious. And yet they hardly represent a sizable "third party": They're not shopping around.

Alex Shephard *is a staff writer at* The New Republic.

THE 100 Most Significant POLITICAL FILMS OF ALL TIME

Not "best." Not "favorite."
Not "most likable." Most significant.
Some are obvious. Some obscure.
A few will be controversial. Let the debate begin.

We wanted to do something special for this double July-August issue of *The New Republic*, but we weren't sure what; then it hit us that summer is movie season, so why not combine that fact with this magazine's great passion and come up with a list of history's best political movies? (*TNR*, by the way, is no stranger to motion pictures. For decades, the magazine published the work of famed twentieth-century critic Stanley Kauffmann, and we continue to run trenchant film analysis today.)

It was that germ of an idea that led us to reach out to J. Hoberman, one of the leading film critics of the last half-century, to curate this project. Hoberman changed it from "best" to "most significant" and led us in assembling a list of around 130 critics to whom we wrote, asking them to participate. We were pleased that 79 wrote back with their lists. On the following pages, see what they came up with, as well as Hoberman's overview essay, and some movies that we at *TNR* thought deserved a mention. Discuss away—and this summer, check newrepublic.com, where you'll have a chance to cast your own votes.

Illustration by Zoë van Dijk

CRITICS' TOP 10

SUMMARIES BY J. HOBERMAN

The Battle of Algiers

(ALGERIA-ITALY, 1966) DIR: GILLO PONTECORVO

Commissioned by the Algerian government, influenced by Frantz Fanon, shot like a newsreel, cast with nonactors, paced (and scored) like a thriller, Pontecorvo's account of a bloody, anti-colonialist insurrection projected Italian neorealism into a new arena. The Third World spoke. That *The Battle of Algiers* had its U.S. premiere months after Newark and Detroit erupted insured its local relevance. The film was introduced as evidence during the trial of 13 Black Panthers charged with a conspiracy to bomb public places and murder police. After their acquittal, a juror wrote that *The Battle of Algiers* "did more to help me see things from the defense point of view than the DA suspected."

The Manchurian Candidate

(UNITED STATES, 1962) DIR: JOHN FRANKENHEIMER

The consummate political entertainment (and quintessential Kennedy-era thriller) is a baroque tale of mind control, assassination, and conspiracy, originally released at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although the most fantastic elements of American politics were acknowledged, just as the nation—even the planet—seemed headed toward total destruction, the movie came into its own as prophesy after JFK was murdered a year later. That it was withdrawn from circulation (albeit over a contract dispute rather than regret) only burnishes its cult reputation.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

(UNITED STATES, 1964) DIR: STANLEY KUBRICK

Contemporary commentators considered *The Manchurian Candidate* irresponsible. *Strangelove* took desecration to another level. Kubrick's outrageous dark comedy of nuclear obliteration was a liberating exorcism. In 1933, the Marx Brothers mocked dictatorship with *Duck Soup*; three decades later, Kubrick and writer Terry Southern travestied the Bomb. Was a hard rain about to fall? Released less than two weeks before the Beatles made their U.S. debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show, Strangelove* ushered in the '60s.

Battleship Potemkin

(USSR, 1925) DIR: SERGEI EISENSTEIN

Commissioned to mark the twentieth anniversary of the failed 1905 revolution against the czar, Eisenstein's second feature film—dramatizing a mutiny on a Black Sea battleship—is the fullest example of what, in opposition to Dziga Vertov's "kino-eye," Eisenstein called his "kino-fist." Time and space are pulverized and reassembled. The notorious "Odessa Steps" sequence has never been surpassed for dynamic montage, nor has the film been bettered as a political rabble-rouser. Everybody, including Nazis, wanted one. (They got *Triumph of the Will*.)

Do the Right Thing

(UNITED STATES, 1989) DIR: SPIKE LEE

Set in the heart of Brooklyn on the hottest Saturday of the summer, Lee's daring mixture of naturalism and allegory, agitprop and psychodrama, broke ground with its outspoken discussion of race and urban tension. Everyone in the large cast of characters has their individual perspective, and everyone mixes it up with everyone else. No one watching can avoid having a point of view. *Do the Right Thing* is uniquely confrontational in addressing racism and racial violence while refusing to take an unambiguous stance for (white) civil order.

Shoah

(FRANCE, 1985) DIR: CLAUDE LANZMANN

At nine-and-a-half hours, Lanzmann's monument to the murdered Jews of Europe refuses to reconstruct the past. The movie is notable for its rigor—eschewing archival footage and narration in favor of contemporary landscapes and long interviews (shown mainly in real time) with those who in one form or another experienced the Holocaust. As ethical as *Shoah* is, I hadn't thought of it as a political film, but then again, a well-known critic once told me it was Israeli propaganda.

TOP ROW FROM LEFT: EVERETT; HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY; SUNSET BOULEVARD/GETTY; EVERETT; DAVID W. GRIFFITH CORP./PHOTOFEST; SYNAPSE FILMS/PHOTOFEST

4

All the President's Men

(UNITED STATES, 1976) DIR: ALAN J. PAKULA

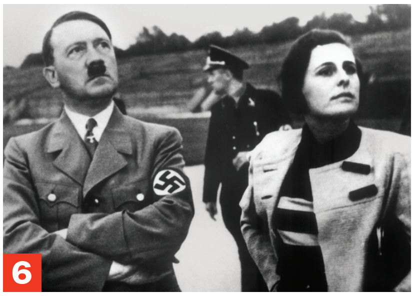
Two *Washington Post* reporters, helped by a mysterious source, single-handedly break the Watergate story and oust Richard Nixon from the White House. More a celebration of investigative journalism than of American democracy, *All the President's Men* was released to coincide with the Bicentennial and supplanted Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* as the most positive of American political movies. Like the Capra film, however, Pakula's stirring thriller is a relic of a less cynical time. A contemporary equivalent would be that perennial favorite of politicians from Rudy Giuliani to Fidel Castro, *The Godfather*.

5

The Birth of a Nation

(UNITED STATES, 1915) DIR: D.W. GRIFFITH

American cinema was born in sin, founded on an unprecedented three-hour historical spectacle with an unscrupulous political agenda. "The task I'm trying to achieve, above all, is to make you see," Griffith announced, by which he meant to overwhelm the spectator into recognizing the nobility of the white supremacist antebellum South—not to mention appreciate the horror of Reconstruction and root for the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. A groundbreaking film in many ways, *The Birth of a Nation* is also the most inflammatory and dangerous movie ever made in the United States. It rewrote history but cannot itself be written out or wished away.



6

Triumph of the Will

(GERMANY, 1935) DIR: LENI RIEFENSTAHL

The Birth of a Nation uses drama to contaminate, personalize, and rewrite history. No less accomplished, formally innovative, or intermittently exciting than *Birth* and even more steeped in the magic of the movies, Riefenstahl's staged documentary of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress demonstrates how cinema can be used to frame an event and fabricate an idol—in this case the twentieth century's foremost homicidal psychopath. Griffith was a sincere revanchist; Riefenstahl, more sophisticated, took refuge in her opportunism.

10

A Face in the Crowd

(UNITED STATES, 1957) DIR: ELIA KAZAN

In the midst of the Cold War, Elia Kazan and Budd Schulberg collaborated on a warning—not about alien invaders or the threat of nuclear war, but about the dangers posed by the American media. The rise and fall of the down-home demagogue Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes (part Huey Long, part Elvis, part Madison Avenue huckster) has long since ceased to be a cautionary warning and become a fact of American life: the specter of entertainment come to power.

BOTTOM ROW: EVERETT; UNIVERSAL PICTURES/PHOTOFEST; EVERETT (X2)

TNR STAFF TOP 10

OK, we here at *TNR* aren't film critics. But we've watched and read about a lot of movies, and we do know a thing or two about politics. So we had our own ideas about the most significant political films of all time. Here's our poll, compiled from Top 10 lists made by 26 staff members.

① **Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb**
② **Malcolm X**
③ **All the President's Men**
④ **The Manchurian Candidate**
⑤ **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington**
⑥ **Lincoln**
⑦ **The Battle of Algiers**
⑧ **Casablanca**
⑨ **Selma**
⑩ **Do the Right Thing**

THE BEST OF THE REST

SUMMARIES BY JULIAN EPP

⑪ Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

(1939) DIR: FRANK CAPRA

Capra was just the right director—and Jimmy Stewart just the right hero—for this fantasy about good actually triumphing over corruption on Capitol Hill. This one never gets old.

⑫ Harlan County U.S.A.

(1976) DIR: BARBARA KOPPLE

This gripping documentary covered the 1973 Brookside Strike by a coal mining community in rural Kentucky against a subsidiary of the Duke Power Company. Way back before places like this became Trump Country.

⑬ La Chinoise

(1967) DIR: JEAN-LUC GODARD

In a loose adaptation of *Demons* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, the film follows a group of young Maoist student activists in Paris organizing a revolution. Visually stunning; politically ... of its time.

⑭ The Conformist

(1970) DIR: BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI

An Italian fascist becomes a government agent and is sent to assassinate his former professor, his onetime leftist mentor. Based on the novel by Alberto Moravia.

⑮ Z

(1969) DIR: COSTA-GAVRAS

A riveting, fictionalized account of the 1963 assassination of a left-wing Greek politician—and the conspiracy behind it—when he is killed in what seems like a traffic accident. Costa-Gavras wrote the screenplay with Jorge Semprún.

⑯ Election

(1999) DIR: ALEXANDER PAYNE

A high school teacher meddles in a student body presidential election in order to stop a particularly cunning student from winning. Tracy Flick will endure forever as one of the great names in cinema.

⑰ La Commune (Paris, 1871)

(2000) DIR: PETER WATKINS

At over five hours long, this historical reenactment—filmed in the style of a documentary—depicts the events of the Paris Commune in 1871 as if modern-day television were there to capture them.

⑱ The Battle of Chile

(1975-1979) DIR: PATRICIO GUZMÁN

A documentary series released in three parts from 1975 to 1979, chronicling the political repression and counter-revolution after the military coup d'état against the Allende government.

⑲ The Lives of Others

(2006) DIR: FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK

Set in the 1980s, this German drama tells the story of a morally conflicted Stasi agent spying on two East German residents, a playwright and an actress.

⑳ The Candidate

(1972) DIR: MICHAEL RITCHIE

Left-wing lawyer Bill McKay runs a long-shot campaign for the U.S. Senate against the popular Republican incumbent—trying not to lose his ideals and integrity in the process. One of the great last lines of any movie.

㉑ Night and Fog

(1955) DIR: ALAIN RESNAIS

Filmed a decade after World War II, this haunting documentary uses footage of the abandoned Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps alongside archival documents to force viewers to confront the horrific atrocities committed by Nazi Germany.

㉒ Malcolm X

(1992) DIR: SPIKE LEE

A tribute to the life and legacy of the civil rights leader, stretching from his teenage years in Boston to his spiritual journey and fight for Black liberation. Probably Denzel's best performance.

㉓ Advise & Consent

(1962) DIR: OTTO PREMINGER

When the president nominates a man with a reddish background to be secretary of state, the Senate ... does what the Senate does. Amazingly frank for 1962, right down to the Greenwich Village gay bar scene.

㉔ Lincoln

(2012) DIR: STEVEN SPIELBERG

The sixteenth president attempts to formally abolish slavery while facing opposition from his own party and increased pressure to end the Civil War. Daniel Day-Lewis is captivating, as is the dark, dusty Washington that Spielberg creates.

Malcolm X

APOLLO
THELONIOUS MONK
DINAH WASHINGTON
ONE WEEK ONLY
SHOE RE
263

WARNER BROS./PHOTOFEST

Lincoln

Citizen Kane

FROM LEFT: 20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT; RKO RADIO/PHOTOFEST

㉕ Strike

(1924) DIR: SERGEI EISENSTEIN

An early and emblematic work of Soviet cinema, this silent film depicts the ultimately unsuccessful revolt by factory workers in prerevolutionary Russia.

㉖ The Great Dictator

(1940) DIR: CHARLIE CHAPLIN

Charlie Chaplin, in a dual role, plays both a fascist modeled after Adolf Hitler and a Jewish barber suffering from amnesia in this biting satire of autocracy. His first full-blown talkie.

㉗ Memories of Underdevelopment

(1968) DIR: TOMÁS GUTIÉRREZ ALEA

After his wife and family flee to Miami following the Bay of Pigs invasion, a wealthy Cuban writer stays behind to reflect on the history and transformation of both his country and himself. The most celebrated work in the history of Cuban cinema.

㉘ Selma

(2014) DIR: AVA DUVERNAY

A poignant portrayal of the 1965 Selma Marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the nonviolent campaign to grant Black Americans their right to vote. David Oyelowo is a spellbinding King.

㉙ The Great McGinty

(1940) DIR: PRESTON STURGES

Dan McGinty escapes a life of poverty to become a henchman for a crooked political boss (Akim Tamiroff, one of the great cinematic sidemen of the golden age). But his meteoric rise is threatened once he develops a conscience.

㉚ Gabriel Over the White House

(1933) DIR: GREGORY LA CAVA

Walter Huston is an uninterested president who pledges to solve the issues of the Great Depression after a near-fatal car accident and divine intervention inspire him to become a populist dictator. William Randolph Hearst helped finance this fantasy.

㉛ Salt of the Earth

(1954) DIR: HERBERT BIBERMAN

Created after the director, producer, and screenwriter were all blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, the film is a dramatization of the Empire Zinc mine workers strike in New Mexico. The film, too, was blacklisted.

㉜ The Hour of the Furnaces

(1968) DIR: OCTAVIO GETINO & FERNANDO E. SOLANAS

A polemical three-part documentary exploring the history of colonialism, class struggle, and liberation in Argentina and the rest of Latin America. Perhaps the paradigmatic "Third World" leftist film.

㉝ Citizen Kane

(1941) DIR: ORSON WELLES

Frequently cited as one of the best films ever made—and Welles's first—the fictional biography centers on the life of wealthy newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane and the mystery of his last word before dying. Still hard to think of a better American film.

㉞ JFK

(1991) DIR: OLIVER STONE

A highly sensationalized but absorbing retelling of the investigation of John F. Kennedy's assassination, exploring—nay, endorsing—the conspiracy theories and an alleged government cover-up.

"What more is there to say about nuclear war? There are heartrending Japanese films on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that are too profoundly horrifying to remember; Kubrick's black comedy gives the mind space to reflect on the human madness behind all war."

—Deborah Young, *The Film Verdict*, on *Dr. Strangelove*

> **“How could we have ended up with a buffoon like Donald Trump? Watch Andy Griffith 60 years before Trump took office. It’s amazing we waited this long to send a reality TV star to the White House.”**
>
> —Ben Mankiewicz, Turner Classic Movies, on *A Face in the Crowd*

㉟ Night of the Living Dead

(1968) DIR: GEORGE A. ROMERO

In what is considered the first modern zombie film, a group barricades themselves in a rural western Pennsylvania farmhouse as the dead are reanimated to hunt for human flesh, with a real-life Pittsburgh TV personality doing on-the-scene reporting. Political? Call it allegorical.

㊱ Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

(1975) DIR: CHANTAL AKERMAN

A widowed mother living in a small Brussels apartment has a mundane life—cooking, cleaning, shopping, and having sex to pay the bills—until she slowly starts to stray from her routine. A feminist tour de force.

㊲ The Murder of Fred Hampton

(1971) DIR: HOWARD ALK

A documentary about the life of the 21-year-old leader of the Illinois Black Panther Party and his murder by the Chicago Police Department. The film vigorously challenged the official police testimony.

㊳ Primary

(1960) DIR: ROBERT DREW

Presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey are followed behind the scenes in Wisconsin as they compete for the Democratic Party primary nomination. One of the first of its kind.

㊴ Hearts and Minds

(1974) DIR: PETER DAVIS

Released shortly after American withdrawal, this groundbreaking documentary examined the U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War over the course of five presidential administrations.

㊵ The Spook Who Sat by the Door

(1973) DIR: IVAN DIXON

A Black man joins the CIA to learn guerrilla warfare techniques, then resigns to train freedom fighters in Chicago. Based on the novel by Sam Greenlee.

㊶ Reds

(1981) DIR: WARREN BEATTY

Beatty’s masterwork, a historical drama about the life of the idealistic journalist John Reed, who documented the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. And Jack Nicholson as Eugene O’Neill? It works.

㊷ Man of Marble

(1977) DIR: ANDRZEJ WAJDA

In what is considered one of Poland’s greatest movies, a film student attempts to track down Mateusz Birkut, a bricklayer turned Communist hero, for her university thesis.

㊸ Born in Flames

(1983) DIR: LIZZIE BORDEN

Set in a dystopian New York City a decade after a peaceful socialist revolution, this film follows a group of feminist organizers after an activist is killed in police custody.

Reds

PARAMOUNT PICTURES/EVERETT

Wag the Dog

NEW LINE/EVERETT

㊹ Duck Soup

(1933) DIR: LEO MCCAREY

The dictator of the fictional nation of Freedonia declares war on a neighboring country in this slapstick comedy starring the Marx Brothers. Featuring Groucho's unforgettable couplet: "If you think this country's bad off now, just wait 'til I get through with it!"

㊺ All Quiet on the Western Front

(1930) DIR: LEWIS MILESTONE

Based on the novel by Erich Maria Remarque, this film follows a group of naïve German recruits fighting in the bloody and horrific front lines of World War I. A bold antiwar statement for 1930.

㊻ Medium Cool

(1969) DIR: HASKELL WEXLER

Using real footage from the 1968 riots in Chicago, the famed cinematographer's directorial debut depicts an unfeeling television cameraman amid the social upheaval surrounding the Democratic National Convention.

㊼ The Parallax View

(1974) DIR: ALAN J. PAKULA

After a senator and presidential candidate is assassinated, the witnesses are quickly killed off, leading a journalist to go undercover and investigate the conspiracy. Part of Pakula's famous Paranoia Trilogy from the 1970s.

㊽ Bulworth

(1998) DIR: WARREN BEATTY

An incumbent California senator facing a tough primary battle takes out a $10 million life insurance policy before putting a contract out on himself. With days left to live, he finally starts to speak his mind. Seen at the time as a dark commentary on Clintonian triangulation.

㊾ Come and See

(1985) DIR: ELEM KLIMOV

An adolescent Belarusian boy finds a rifle and joins the Soviet resistance during World War II to fight against the occupying Nazi forces. Things get even worse when he returns home.

㊿ Punishment Park

(1971) DIR: PETER WATKINS

In this pseudo-documentary, President Nixon declares a state of emergency and has political radicals arrested. Put before a tribunal, the rebels are given two options: prison or their participation in a brutal military training exercise.

(51) The Act of Killing

(2012) DIR: JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER

In this documentary, decades after the mass murders of civilians by the Indonesian military, the leaders of the death squads reenact the killings—often with a bone-chilling casualness—using their favorite movie genres.

(52) Bicycle Thieves

(1948) DIR: VITTORIO DE SICA

A working-class man and his eight-year-old son search the streets of Rome for a stolen bicycle in this neorealist Italian drama. A searing depiction of the state in which Mussolini and his fascists left their country.

(53) Nazi Concentration and Prison Camps (shown at the Nuremberg trials)

(1945) DIR: GEORGE STEVENS

After the end of World War II, this footage was presented at the war crime trials of Nazi leaders. The evidence included film from Germans as well as the Allied troops who liberated the concentration camps. Stevens, known for comedies in the 1930s, shifted to drama after seeing what happened in Dachau.

(54) Wag the Dog

(1997) DIR: BARRY LEVINSON

As the president prepares for reelection, a political spin doctor and a famous Hollywood producer manufacture a fake war with Albania to distract the public from an impending sex scandal. A poorly timed release from the perspective of Bill Clinton, who was accused—wrongly—of doing the same in Iraq.

(55) Grand Illusion

(1937) DIR: JEAN RENOIR

When their plane is shot down during a reconnaissance mission, two French soldiers are sent to a World War I German prison camp, but the pair work with their fellow inmates to plot an escape. Goebbels ordered the destruction of every print of the film.

(56) The Fog of War

(2003) DIR: ERROL MORRIS

Robert McNamara, former secretary of defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, discusses his life and lessons learned in this confessional documentary. His reputation—already hurting—took a big hit here.

(57) The Last Hurrah

(1958) DIR: JOHN FORD

An old-school Irish American mayor in New England tries to run for a fifth—and final—term. Ford gets mawkish here; Spencer Tracy keeps it real.

HEAR WILLIE
AT MAMM... BA...BEQUE ÷ UP

All the King's Men

COLUMBIA PICTURES/PHOTOFEST

(58) I Am Not Your Negro

(2016) DIR: RAOUL PECK

Narrated by Samuel L. Jackson and based on James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, this astonishing documentary reflects on the lives of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Baldwin himself.

(59) All the King's Men

(1949) DIR: ROBERT ROSSEN

An ambitious populist politician is corrupted by power after being elected governor. Based on the Pulitzer-winning novel by Robert Penn Warren. Huey Long remains the only prominent social democratic fascist America has ever produced.

(60) Love and Anarchy

(1973) DIR: LINA WERTMÜLLER

In the 1930s, an anarchist farmer in Italy begins living in a brothel while preparing to assassinate Benito Mussolini after his friend is killed by the fascist police.

(61) Earth

(1930) DIR: ALEKSANDR DOVZHENKO

In a Ukrainian village, peasant farmers begin collectivizing with the help of a tractor in the final film of Dovzhenko's "Ukraine Trilogy." Certainly relevant right now.

(62) Khrustalyov, My Car!

(1998) DIR: ALEKSEY GERMAN

This hallucinatory black-and-white Russian comedy-drama is set in the winter of 1953, guiding us through the horrifying final days of Joseph Stalin's reign.

(63) Lumumba: Death of a Prophet

(1991) DIR: RAOUL PECK

A bracing documentary on the life and mysterious death of Lumumba, the prime minister of the Congo and a monumental figure in the fight for African independence before his assassination in 1961.

(64) The American President

(1995) DIR: ROB REINER

Written by Aaron Sorkin, this romance stars Michael Douglas as a widowed president running for reelection who falls in love with an environmental lobbyist—despite his staffers' objections. That rare genre: a political rom-com.

(65) The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On

(1987) DIR: KAZUO HARA

After the end of World War II, Kenzō Okuzaki, a former Imperial Japanese private, searches for and interrogates the officers involved in the execution of two of his fellow soldiers. Forty-two years after the war's end, but worth the wait.

(66) The Sorrow and the Pity

(1969) DIR: MARCEL OPHÜLS

This stunning two-part documentary examines the French people's collaboration and resistance during Nazi occupation in World War II. The witness-interview format, now well-worn, was still new in 1969.

(67) Point of Order!

(1964) DIR: EMILE DE ANTONIO

Using only television footage from the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings, this documentary is a stunning insight into the downfall of the corrupt, anti-Communist senator. "Have you no sense of decency?" will live forever.

(68) Arsenal

(1929) DIR: ALEKSANDR DOVZHENKO

A frontline Ukrainian soldier returns home to Kyiv after World War I to organize a workers' uprising at the town's arsenal. Number two in the trilogy (see number 61).

> **"No other film did more to set in the American people's minds just how pivotal a free and independent press is as a check to our government."**
>
> —Travis Hopson, Punch Drunk Critics, on *All the President's Men*

(69) The Best Man

(1964) DIR: FRANKLIN J. SCHAFFNER

Written by Gore Vidal and based on his 1960 play, this drama follows two leading presidential candidates vying for their party's nomination. Of its time, but a great cast keeps it moving.

(70) The Death of Stalin

(2017) DIR: ARMANDO IANNUCCI

After Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin unexpectedly dies from a stroke (well, most likely), members of the Central Committee fight for power in this satirical black comedy banned by the Russian Culture Ministry.

(71) Being There

(1979) DIR: HAL ASHBY

A naïve gardener in Washington, D.C., leaves his secluded life to explore the outside world, becoming a political adviser and celebrity. Based on the novel by Jerzy Kosiński.

> **"Political films do not get any better, or more significant, than this one."**
>
> —Kenneth Turan on *The Battle of Algiers*

(72) Three Days of the Condor

(1975) DIR: SYDNEY POLLACK

When a paper-pushing analyst for the CIA discovers that his co-workers have been brutally murdered, he goes undercover to find the perpetrators. Redford and Dunaway: It didn't get much better in the '70s.

(73) Dogville

(2003) DIR: LARS VON TRIER

In this avant-garde film shot on a single soundstage, a woman on the run from gangsters takes shelter in a small Colorado town. It looks like no other film you've ever seen.

(74) Platform

(2000) DIR: JIA ZHANGKE

Following the death of Mao Zedong and in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution, an amateur theater troupe abandons state-approved performances and starts playing rock and roll.

(75) Starship Troopers

(1997) DIR: PAUL VERHOEVEN

In the twenty-third century, the human United Citizen Federation is at war with a race of alien insects from the planet Klendathu in this initially misunderstood satire of militarism and fascism.

(76) They Live

(1988) DIR: JOHN CARPENTER

A drifter in Los Angeles finds a pair of sunglasses that reveal the world's ruling class as skull-faced aliens controlling humanity with subliminal messages: "Stay Asleep," "Submit to Authority." Sound like anyone you know?

(77) A Short Film About Killing

(1988) DIR: KRZYSZTOF KIESLOWSKI

When a man murders a taxi driver in the Polish countryside, a young criminal defense lawyer tries to keep him from receiving the death penalty.

(78) Eight Hours Don't Make a Day

(1972) DIR: RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER

Broadcast in five episodes, this miniseries depicted contemporary working-class German life through the eyes of a young factory employee who falls in love and organizes with his co-workers.

(79) No

(2012) DIR: PABLO LARRAÍN

A semi-fictional account of Chile's 1988 referendum to decide whether dictator Augusto Pinochet would stay in power. It stars Gael García Bernal as the adman who leads the opposition campaign.

(80) City Hall

(1996) DIR: HAROLD BECKER

A deputy mayor, played by John Cusack (to Al Pacino's mayor), investigates the killing of a six-year-old during a shootout between a cop and a mobster in New York City.

The Death of Stalin

IFC FILMS/PHOTOFEST

Zero Dark Thirty

(81) The Times of Harvey Milk

(1984) DIR: ROB EPSTEIN

The story of the first openly gay man elected to public office in California, Harvey Milk, from his time as an activist with the Gay Rights Movement to his assassination. Murderer Dan White killed himself the year after this film was released.

(82) American Sniper

(2014) DIR: CLINT EASTWOOD

Based on the memoir by Chris Kyle, the story follows the famed Navy SEAL sniper during his four tours in Iraq and how the war altered his life after. Its history of U.S. involvement in Iraq is ... odd.

(83) Go, Go Second Time Virgin

(1969) DIR: KÔJI WAKAMATSU

In this experimental Japanese drama, two sexually traumatized teenagers meet on an apartment rooftop and open up about their troubled lives. A controversial entry in Japan's "pink film" genre.

(84) High and Low

(1963) DIR: AKIRA KUROSAWA

An anonymous caller has mistakenly kidnapped the son of a wealthy executive's chauffeur and holds him for 30 million yen in ransom. *The Washington Post* said this was Macbeth "if Macbeth had married better."

(85) Ivan the Terrible, Part Two

(1958) DIR: SERGEI EISENSTEIN

A follow-up on Russia's infamous and violent first czar. Stalin liked part one. This one, featuring secret police and summary executions, not so much.

(86) Olympia

(1938) DIR: LENI RIEFENSTAHL

The controversial documentary follows the 1936 games held in Nazi Germany, using multiple cameras and a range of innovative and distinctive techniques.

(87) Zero Dark Thirty

(2012) DIR: KATHRYN BIGELOW

A dramatized account of a CIA agent's search for Osama bin Laden and the slaying of the Al Qaeda leader by Navy SEALs. Jessica Chastain's performance won a Golden Globe.

(88) The Passion of Joan of Arc

(1928) DIR: CARL THEODOR DREYER

This timeless silent film based on actual historical records tells the story of the trial, conviction, and execution of Joan of Arc in 1431. Dreyer was one of the world's most important early filmmakers.

(89) Salvador

(1986) DIR: OLIVER STONE

Photojournalist Richard Boyle travels to El Salvador to document the country's civil war in this fictionalized biographical drama. Try to forget what's become of James Woods, who is excellent.

(90) Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion

(1970) DIR: ELIO PETRI

A high-ranking police detective cuts the throat of his mistress and intentionally leaves behind evidence to see if he is immune to prosecution.

(91) Syriana

(2005) DIR: STEPHEN GAGHAN

Using multiple interlocking narratives, this slick thriller, starring George Clooney as CIA agent Bob Barnes, highlights the conspiracy and corruption of the global oil industry.

> **"This I believe was single-handedly responsible for Ed Koch losing his party's nomination, paving the way for David Dinkins. And David Dinkins's ineptitude and callousness paved the way for Giuliani...."**
>
> —David Edelstein on *Do the Right Thing*

COLUMBIA PICTURES/EVERETT

WAIT, YOU MISSED *WHAT?*

Our critics didn't list *Apocalypse Now*. They passed on classics like *Chinatown* and *On the Waterfront*, and declined to rank recent hits like *Get Out* and *Parasite*. Here are the films that our staff argues should have made the cut.

Casablanca *(dir: Michael Curtiz, 1942)* is a stirring allegory about America's much-delayed entry into World War II that pretends to be little more than a melodrama about a love triangle sprinkled with a bit of foreign intrigue. Bogart represents a United States wary of entangling alliances, but in the end he chucks isolationism (and Ingrid Bergman!) to fight fascism.

—Timothy Noah

Invasion of the Body Snatchers *(dir: Don Siegel, 1956)* captured 1950s fears of brainwashing, psychological manipulation, and soulless conformity. Set in a small town (the inferior 1978 remake was moved to San Francisco), the horror lies in watching loved ones and neighbors be transformed into alien pod people, who look the same but are now without emotions or free will.

—Walter Shapiro

Seven Days in May *(dir: John Frankenheimer, 1964)* diagnosed the dangers of the far right and warned of its threat to liberal democracy. After the president signs a disarmament treaty with Russia, most of the Joint Chiefs of Staff plot a coup. The opening scene is Charlottesville and January 6 all in one. **—Howery Pack**

Black Panthers *(dir: Agnès Varda, 1968)* is the source almost every director uses when they want to show the Panthers. With shots of women chanting, "The revolution has come! Off the pigs!" Varda captured the spirit of resistance and the future of protest.

—Melissa Gira Grant

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie *(dir: Luis Buñuel, 1972)* is the movie that *Inception* wishes it was: The stakes between the real and the dreamed are fiercely political, increasingly tangled, and simultaneously sad and hilarious.

—Rowan Ricardo Phillips

The Godfather Part II *(dir: Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)* isn't crafted as perfectly as *The Godfather*, but its canvas is broader, and its twin narratives—of Vito Corleone's rise in the early twentieth century and of his son Michael's decline through the late 1950s—are an enthralling meditation on why oppressed people seek power and how it corrupts them.

—Timothy Noah

Nashville *(dir: Robert Altman, 1975)* People who think *Nashville* is a movie about country music also think *The Brothers Karamazov* is a novel about a family spat. Right up to the assassination of Barbara Jean, the political signals and metaphors are profound.

—Michael Tomasky

Chinatown *(dir: Roman Polanski, 1974)* gave California water wars the noir treatment. What appears to be a hard-boiled detective story about infidelity and homicide turns out to be a battle for the West's most precious resource.

—Laura Marsh

Thelma and Louise *(dir: Ridley Scott, 1991)* exploded into the culture in the '90s, interrogating rape and sexism and the U.S. justice system—and was one of the first movies I'd ever seen that put women's friendship at its center.

—Kirsten Denker

Bowling for Columbine *(dir: Michael Moore, 2002)* tried to convey the lunacy of America's addiction to guns, in what would become an age of mass shootings. **—Hafiz Rashid**

Downfall *(dir: Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004)* When people think of this movie today, they think only of the many (and often hilarious) parodies. That's a shame. Berlin in April 1945 was probably as close as human civilization has ever come to hell on Earth, and *Downfall* captures it brilliantly.

—Michael Tomasky

An Inconvenient Truth *(dir: Davis Guggenheim, 2006)* documents Al Gore's effort to raise the alarm about climate change. "I need to move / I need to wake up," Melissa Etheridge sings as the credits roll. **—Melissa Rodman**

Burn After Reading *(dir: Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2008)* imagines "a group of dunderheaded Americans who think they would benefit from a covert alliance with the Russian government." What seemed a madcap premise in 2008 turned out to be, as Jeet Heer wrote in these pages, "singularly prophetic of the Trump era." I hate the reason this film aged so well. **—Jason Linkins**

In the Loop *(dir: Armando Iannucci, 2009)* In most American political films, men of the people enter politics, encounter a venal and corrupt establishment, and ultimately thwart it. There are no heroes in this satire of the lead-up to the Iraq War: Every member of its transatlantic political and military establishment is unscrupulous, stupid, and/or immoral. It's the anti–*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; no movie is as clear-eyed about the way politics actually works.

—Alex Shephard

Margin Call *(dir: J.C. Chandor, 2011)* was the cultural counterpunch that millennials who were raised on *The West Wing* desperately needed—a snappy dramatization of the financial crisis that showed corporate hogwash and sheer self-interest are more than enough to make smart-sounding people crash the economy.

—Heather Souvaine Horn

TOP TO BOTTOM: POPPERFOTO/GETTY; METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER/GETTY; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY; NEWMARKET/EVERETT

(92) The Tin Drum

(1979) DIR: VOLKER SCHLÖNDORFF

A three-year-old child in Danzig during the rise of the Nazi Party is disgusted by the adult world and decides to stop growing. Based on the novel by Günter Grass.

(93) The World

(2004) DIR: JIA ZHANGKE

Following the lives of the young employees at Beijing World Park, this gloomy drama examines globalization's influence on China's working class.

(94) Weekend

(1967) DIR: JEAN-LUC GODARD

A bourgeois married couple take a weekend road trip to collect their inheritance in this black comedy satirizing the 1960s and French society.

(95) I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang

(1932) DIR: MERVYN LEROY

Unable to find work, a returning veteran is forced at gunpoint to participate in a robbery and sentenced to hard labor.

(96) A Grin Without a Cat

(1977) DIR: CHRIS MARKER

A remarkable documentary and essay on radical movements worldwide, exploring the success of the global left in the 1960s and its decline in the 1970s.

(97) Germany Year Zero

(1948) DIR: ROBERTO ROSSELLINI

In Allied-occupied Berlin, a German boy and former Hitler Youth struggles to provide for his family in the war-torn city. The third entry in Rossellini's War Trilogy.

(98) The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

(1962) DIR: JOHN FORD

This black-and-white Western starring Jimmy Stewart and John Wayne tells the story—almost entirely through flashback—of a young lawyer traveling to a frontier town terrorized by an outlaw. Probably Ford's most morally complex film.

(99) Fail Safe

(1964) DIR: SIDNEY LUMET

The president attempts to contact the Soviet prime minister and prevent a nuclear catastrophe after a fleet of bombers is accidentally sent to destroy Moscow. A classic Cold War thriller.

(100) One Sings, the Other Doesn't

(1977) DIR: AGNÈS VARDA

Two French women—an aspiring singer and a young mother—leading parallel lives in the 1970s reunite as they search for meaning against the backdrop of the women's liberation movement.

METHODOLOGY

The New Republic asked each critic to submit a list of at least 10 films, ranked from most to least significant. For each list, the highest-rated film received 10 points, the second highest received nine points, etc., with the lowest rated receiving one point. For lists that contained more than 10 films, each additional film received just one point. Because 10 ranked films received a total of 55 points, films listed by critics who submitted their choices "unranked" and in no particular order received 5.5 points each. The points for each film were then added together. Films that tied—that is, when two or more received the same number of total points—were ordered by the number of individual votes.

THE CRITICS

Sam Adams, Slate
Siddhant Adlakha
David Ansen, Palm Springs International Film Festival
Michael Atkinson, *The Village Voice*
Jami Bernard
Manuel Betancourt
Peter Biskind
Charles Bramesco
Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*
Dwight Brown, NNPA News Wire
Jeannette Catsoulis, *The New York Times*
Justin Chang, *Los Angeles Times*
Karen Cooper, Film Forum
Jordan Cronk, *Film Comment*
Gary Crowdus, *Cineaste*
Gary Dauphin
Peter Debruge, *Variety*
David Denby, *The New Yorker*
Thomas Doherty, Brandeis University
Alonso Duralde, *The Film Verdict*
Bilge Ebiri, *New York Magazine*/Vulture
David Edelstein
Steve Erickson, UC Riverside
David Fear, *Rolling Stone*
Kathy Fennessy, Video Librarian
Kenji Fujishima, Slant Magazine & TheaterMania
Chris Fujiwara
Graham Fuller, *Cineaste*
Devika Girish, *Film Comment*
Bruce Goldstein, Film Forum
Ed Gonzalez, Slant Magazine
A.S. Hamrah, *The Baffler* & *n+1*
Odie Henderson, *Boston Globe*
J. Hoberman
Travis Hopson, Punch Drunk Critics
Ann Hornaday, *The Washington Post*
Peter Howell, *Toronto Star*
Dave Kehr, Museum of Modern Art
Ben Kenigsberg
Lisa Kennedy
Glenn Kenny, RogerEbert.com
Stuart Klawans
Eric Kohn, Indiewire
Nguyên Lê
Emanuel Levy
Stuart Liebman, CUNY Graduate Center
Dennis Lim, New York Film Festival
Violet Lucca
Leonard Maltin, LeonardMaltin.com
Ben Mankiewicz, Turner Classic Movies
Mia Mask, Vassar College
Wilson Morales, Black Film and TV
Vikram Murthi, *The Nation*
Adam Nayman, *Cinema Scope*
Farran Smith Nehme, Self-Styled Siren
Darragh O'Donoghue, *Cineaste*
Michał Oleszczyk, University of Warsaw
Michael Phillips, *Chicago Tribune*
Nick Pinkerton
Claudia Puig
Leonard Quart, *Cineaste*
Jed Rapfogel, Anthology Film Archives
Rex Reed, Observer
Carrie Rickey
Lupe Rodriguez Haas, CineMovie.TV
Richard Roeper, *Chicago Sun-Times*
Jonathan Rosenbaum, JonathanRosenbaum.net
A.O. Scott, *The New York Times*
Gene Seymour, CNN Opinion & *The Nation*
Jose Solís
José Teodoro, *Film Comment*
David Thomson
Scott Tobias
Kenneth Turan
Dennis West, *Cineaste*
Armond White, *National Review*
Alissa Wilkinson, Vox
Deborah Young, *The Film Verdict*
Stephanie Zacharek, *Time*

I Am Not Your Negro

Night of the Living Dead

WHAT *IS* A “POLITICAL FILM,” ANYWAY?

It's about revolution. Or elections. It can be a thriller. Or a comedy. It's a movie whose politics we love. It's a movie whose politics we detest. It's even, sometimes, a zombie movie.

By J. Hoberman

POLLS GAUGE PUBLIC OPINION. So do movies. Seventy-nine expert witnesses—film critics, programmers, and academics—named their candidates for the most significant political movies of the past 120 years, listing a combined total of over 450 individual films. Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) won ... by a lot. What did we learn?

1) Polls are about the polled as much as the subject. Virtually all who provided lists were based in North America. Consequently, American films and American taste ruled. Six of the 10 highest vote-getters—around 30 of the Top 50, and half of the full 100—were made by Americans. (China and Japan were unrepresented in the Top 50; Iran, Romania, and South Korea in the Top 100.) Nevertheless, the overwhelming primacy of an anti-colonialist Italian-Algerian co-production in which no English was spoken, and which was written, directed, and scored by Italians (two of them associated with spaghetti Westerns), is a victory for cosmopolitanism.

2) Although voters represented several generations, some eras are more politically fraught than others. The oldest and newest films in the Top 50—D.W. Griffith's fifth-place *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Ava DuVernay's twenty-eighth-place *Selma* (2014), both screened at the White House—span a century. But so far as decades go, the 1960s dominate—slightly less so among younger voters. Including *The Battle of Algiers*, 15 out of the Top 50 were produced during the 1960–72 period, with another six set then. No other period came close. Seven films were made or set in the 1940s, three of those detailing wartime atrocities.

3) There is a consensual idea of what constitutes political cinema, if not a universal buy-in. “Every film I care about is political,” a seasoned critic explained by way of declining to participate in the poll. The personal may be the political. Still, subjective evaluations notwithstanding, some movies are understood as more “political” than others.

Over a dozen films in the Top 100 were about elections. Eight concerned the subject of revolution, over 10 depicted anti-democratic coups, and many more focused on political violence ranging from strikes and demonstrations to murder, genocide, and war.

Eight of the American movies in the Top 50 dealt with (or in) racism. Only two of the Top 50 make feminist statements. Younger voters were more militant, supporting *The Hour of the Furnaces* (#32), *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (#37), and *Born in Flames* (#43) in proportionally higher numbers. Roughly half of the Top 50 (and exactly half of the Top 10) could be described as entertainments. (The entertainment quotient falls off a bit between #51 and #100.) Right-wing political icon John Wayne barely makes it into the Top 100 (too bad he turned down the lead in #59 *All the King's Men*). His left-wing analog Jane Fonda appears not at all. On the other hand, Warren Beatty stars in three movies in the Top 50, two of which he directed, thus joining Sergei Eisenstein, Spike Lee, Peter Watkins, Alan J. Pakula, Leni Riefenstahl, Jean-Luc Godard, Oliver Stone, John Ford, Raoul Peck, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, and Jia Zhangke as the filmmakers with more than one Top 100 picture.

To take a phrase from a young Maoist in Jean-Luc Godard's thirteenth-ranked

FROM LEFT: MAGNOLIA PICTURES/PHOTOFEST; EVERETT

La Chinoise (1967), the list is consecrated to "sincerity and violence." *The Battle of Algiers* garnered nearly as many points as the two runners-up—*The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964)—combined. Cited by 35 voters, Pontecorvo's painstaking re-creation of an anti-colonial revolt, so naturalistic it was advertised at the time as nondocumentary, headed 12 lists, three times as many as fourth-ranked *All the President's Men* (1976), *Dr. Strangelove*, and *The Birth of a Nation*, each put first by four voters.

In ways, the poll confirmed popular wisdom. Before the results were tabulated, I asked the chatbot formerly known as Sydney which American and foreign "political movies" were most often cited in lists and polls. "There is no definitive answer," was the sage response. "Different sources may have different criteria and methods for ranking political movies." And yet, based on the "web sources" Syd consulted, the most frequently mentioned or praised movies (by critics and audiences) were the poll's top four vote-getters. And aside from *The Battle of Algiers* and *Battleship Potemkin*, the bot's two other foreign films, Costa-Gavras's anti-fascist thriller *Z* (1969) and *The Lives of Others* (2006), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's account of a lonely Stasi agent, made the Top 20, numbers 15 and 19, respectively.

Consensus within the consensus: Over half of the eligible American films were selected by the Library of Congress's National Film Registry. The pariahs not listed on the registry include three problematic blockbusters that made our list: Warren Beatty's 1981 pro-Communist *Reds* (#41), Oliver Stone's unpatriotic 1991 *JFK* (#34), and, of course, Griffith's white supremacist *Birth of a Nation*, the foundational work of American commercial cinema. None were surprising choices. What made the poll results interesting were the ways in which the notion of "political" was expanded or contracted.

One list was headed by Shinsuke Ogawa's 1971 documentary, *Narita: The Peasants of the Second Fortress*, detailing the popular armed struggle against the construction of Tokyo's Narita Airport; another included a 40-minute documentary portrait of sex workers occupying a French church—*The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*, by the feminist activist Carole Roussopoulos; and a third listed the long-banned 1943 Warner Bros. cartoon *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs*, with the observation: "perennially misunderstood, this is at once a celebration of marginalized Black culture and a still necessary assault on the white supremacist values naturalized as 'all-American' by Disney."

Consensus coalesced around movies that caused, courted, or re-created controversy. Feted in Venice, banned in France, introduced as evidence in the trial of the Panther 13, *The Battle of Algiers* was as much a political event as a political movie. So too Lewis Milestone's 1930 *All Quiet on the Western Front* (#45), at least in Germany, where the movie's antiwar message caused Nazi brownshirts to disrupt screenings and attack movie patrons. Conspiracy buffs imagined *The Manchurian Candidate* to be Lee Harvey Oswald's "trigger film," and, according to Susan Sontag, liberal intellectuals left *Dr. Strangelove*'s previews convinced that, once it opened, movie houses would be stormed by "mobs of American Legion types." (It was in fact delayed two months after Kennedy was shot.) Similarly, a few hysterical pundits expressed concern that Spike Lee's 1989 *Do the Right Thing* (#8) would inspire riots in theaters.

In a class by itself: D.W. Griffith's openly white supremacist, blatantly demagogic account of America's Civil War and Reconstruction, quite possibly the most revered and reviled movie ever made and, in many ways, the most influential. It was followed in the poll by a partner in crime, Leni Riefenstahl's sixth-place love letter to Adolf Hitler, *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Except for a few outliers, younger critics shunned both *The Birth of a Nation* and *Triumph of the Will*—suggesting that objectionable politics trumped historical significance. (It's notable that younger voters all but ignored the second-place finisher *The Manchurian Candidate*, perhaps a response to the film's stereotyped Chinese and North Korean Communist villains.) No films were more reprehensible than *Birth* or *Triumph*, but none engaged twentieth-century politics more directly or cast a more powerful spell, not only on audiences but filmmakers.

After that pair comes one of Riefenstahl's inspirations, Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 *Battleship Potemkin*, which got one first-place vote. (Younger critics didn't much care for *Potemkin* either, although Eisenstein's first feature film, *Strike*, which came in #25, got five votes.) Variously banned in Britain, France, the United States, and Germany (where it also had its greatest success), *Potemkin* was the most celebrated and proudly propagandist propaganda film ever made.

Are political films necessarily tendentious? Not necessarily, although, like most movies, many are what the French political philosopher Jacques Ellul termed "sociological propaganda," implicitly supporting the status quo. Just shy of the Top 10 (with one first-place vote), Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) is a case in point. The feel-good spectacle of James Stewart's Boy Scout freshman senator filibustering a corrupt Congress to its senses may be Hollywood's most resilient—and universal—political fantasy. Yes, the system works, and one good man can make a difference!

Based on an actual case, *All the President's Men* (1976) is also sociological propaganda, illustrating Truth, Justice, and the American Way. On the other hand, despite its nominal happy ending (complete with a We the People–style bromide), Elia Kazan and Budd Schulberg's tenth-place *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) is not. Hardly a popular success, the movie was a canary in the coal mine, a warning made by two former

It's notable that younger voters all but ignored the second-place finisher, *The Manchurian Candidate*, perhaps a response to the film's stereotyped Chinese and North Korean Communist villains.

Communists against the TV-mediated merger of politics and show business. Another film showing a media-driven map to power, the Robert Redford vehicle *The Candidate* (1972), in twentieth place, is also more cautionary than comforting.

A more realistic fictional depiction of American electoral politics than *The Candidate*, Robert Altman's mockumentary miniseries *Tanner '88* turned an invented candidate loose in the 1988 Democratic primaries. Largely forgotten, it received only a single vote, although it provided as accurate an impression of the 1988 primary season as found in Sidney Blumenthal's written history, *Pledging Allegiance*. (Indeed, Blumenthal was credited as a consultant.) However amusing, the movie was hardly a revelation. After eight years of Ronald Reagan, the existence of a National Entertainment State was a given.

HAVING DEMONSTRATED cinema's power to rewrite the past, D.W. Griffith similarly proved that a film might intervene in history. Shown at the White House and endorsed by President Woodrow Wilson, *The Birth of a Nation* promoted the myth of the Lost Cause, falsified the history of Reconstruction, reactivated the Ku Klux Klan, and promoted a new national narrative based on Aryan birthright. It also inspired America's first counter cinema, the "race movies" made by Oscar Micheaux and others.

Other movies have sought to force similar revisionism. If *JFK* failed to rebut the Warren Commission, it did contribute to a political climate that helped elect Bill Clinton in 1992. Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1977), ranked #42, may not have toppled the Polish government, but it did cost the head of the Polish film industry his job and got the minister of culture booted from the Politburo. Still, causal effects can be exaggerated. Akin to the belief that *All the President's Men* inspired a spike in applications to journalism school is the cinephile legend that *La Chinoise* inspired the Columbia students who, three weeks after the movie opened in an out-of-the-way Manhattan theater, began occupying campus buildings.

Can TV alter the course of an election? The cynical comedy *Wag the Dog* (1997) got six votes and placed #54, having provided a new expression for media-manipulated bait and switch. Dramatizing the 1988 Chilean plebiscite that removed Augusto Pinochet from power, Pablo Larraín's *No* (2012), which garnered several votes and ranked #79, suggested that TV sorcery might be a source of democratic power.

The 18-minute campaign film *A New Beginning* (1984) did not by itself reelect Ronald Reagan but immeasurably helped by casting him as the star of a feel-good patriotic spectacle. Sometimes known as *Morning in America*, it furthered the notion of politician as performer introduced by #38 *Primary* (1960), Robert Drew's cinema verité account of JFK on the campaign trail. It also introduced the theme music (Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A.") and visual rhetoric that would characterize campaigns for decades to follow.

The 2004 campaign brought Lionel Chetwynd's TV film *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis*, the ineffectual John Kerry biopic *Going Upriver*, and Michael Moore's enormously popular Palme d'Or laureate *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Did Moore's movie persuade anyone to support John Kerry? (It received but one vote in our poll.) More recent tendentious campaign features by Dinesh D'Souza and Steve Bannon are essentially Pavlovian infomercials. These belong to that subset of political films that celebrate or, less frequently, satirize political leaders. The exemplar here is *Triumph of the Will*, surely the greatest photo op of the twentieth century, and a movie that Bannon is not afraid to admire. (*The Great Dictator*, Charles Chaplin's 1940 parody of Hitler, in general, and of *Triumph of the Will*, in particular, finished #26, with one critic's vote for #1.)

Still, election-year films can surf the zeitgeist. The bicentennial confluence of two Cinderellas, Jimmy Carter and Rocky Balboa, is a suggestive coincidence. The poll's two most cited American examples of leadership films—Spike Lee's 1992 *Malcolm X* (#22) and Steven Spielberg's 2012 *Lincoln* (#24)—were election-year period dramas that spoke to the present. Thanks to Denzel Washington's performance, Lee's film added its subject's analysis to the discussion that followed the L.A. riots, while, with its focus on the president's success in getting the Thirteenth Amendment through the lame-duck House of Representatives, *Lincoln* could hardly fail to remind the viewer of the shenanigans required to pass the 2010 Affordable Care Act.

The most fantastic of straightforward political films, Gregory La Cava's 1933 *Gabriel Over the White House*, a movie masterminded

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the sorrow and the pity
THE CONFORMIST
SERGEI EISENSTEIN'S
BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN
MEPHISTO
NATIONTIME
HOMELAND: IRAQ YEAR ZERO

by William Randolph Hearst to coincide with FDR's inauguration and advocate for a Mussolini-style dictatorship, received one first-place vote and, at #30, finished three places ahead of *Citizen Kane* (1941), which—Henry King's 1944 flopperoo hagiography *Wilson* notwithstanding—might be considered Hollywood's preeminent example of a Great Man film. In addition to *Triumph of the Will*, these include Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and Laurence Olivier's wartime *Henry V* (1944). Neither was cited in the poll, although Raoul Peck's 2000 *Lumumba* got several votes, including a first-place nod, to rank #63.

It feels more democratic when individual protagonists serve to illuminate a larger social conflict. The poll's preeminent example is *Do the Right Thing*, which deploys a host of characters to embody or articulate a range of viewpoints. Two more examples are *The Lives of Others* and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 *Memories of Underdevelopment* (#27), a newsreel-enriched portrait of a disaffected bourgeois in revolutionary Havana. The epitome of Italian neorealism, Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), got two first-place votes but wound up only #52.

Other films privilege movements, like labor unions. Martin Ritt's inspirational *Norma Rae* (1979) received but a single vote, although Barbara Kopple's Oscar-winning documentary *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976) finished twelfth, and Herbert Biberman's *Salt of the Earth* (1954), another movie about striking miners, ranked thirty-first. Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925) placed twenty-fifth. Edgier movies featured revolutionary cells. In addition to *La Chinoise*, the Top 50 included Ivan Dixon's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973). A blaxploitation film animated by the ideas of Frantz Fanon, it finished #40, just ahead of Lizzie Borden's independent feature *Born in Flames* (1983), which envisions radical feminists fomenting revolution via pirate radio stations.

V for Vendetta (2005), a movie adapted from Alan Moore's graphic novel, directed by James McTeigue, and subsequently adopted by left-wing anarchists and hard-right libertarians, received only one vote. It's a curious omission. The movie introduced a political koan ("People should not be afraid of their governments—governments should be afraid of their people") as well as a rakish, smirking icon. Endorsed by the anarchist hacker group Anonymous and by WikiLeaks, worn in demonstrations from Zuccotti Park to Hong Kong to Washington, D.C., the smiling Guy Fawkes mask was a meme foreshadowing the French yellow vest and the American MAGA cap.

Some films dramatize factual occurrences. Others, like *V for Vendetta*, imagine political scenarios. (A bootlegged cult film in China, *V for Vendetta* was unexpectedly telecast in 2012—a portent taken by some as evidence of the new leader Xi Jinping's reformism. Dream on....) *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Dr. Strangelove* scenarios illuminated and have come to represent the Kennedy era. Released during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the former posited a brainwashed assassin and a fascist coup; made after the crisis, the latter envisioned the end of the world.

While these movies (and *A Face in the Crowd*) are self-aware political scenarios, less artful ones abound. Anything but apolitical, Reagan-era action flicks like *First Blood* (1982) and *Top Gun* (1986) are too frankly propagandist to be allegories. Westerns, however, as the genre that exemplified America, were implicitly political (Italian as well as American). Rich in Cold War tropes, John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948) and Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952), an anti-blacklist allegory that gave Solidarnosc its poster image and became the favorite film of presidents Eisenhower, Clinton, and George W. Bush, got one vote each.

Particularly during the Cold War, science fiction tended toward political allegory. No less than *High Noon* (or *V for Vendetta*), the scenario advanced by Don Siegel's 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* lent itself to multiple, opposite readings. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) is one of the most influential political movies ever made—an unfashionably progressive plea for coexistence appearing a year into the Korean War that made so profound an impression on Ronald Reagan that he astonished Mikhail Gorbachev three-plus decades later by recounting the plot. Neither of these films made a single list, but a substantial number of voters read the ultimate '60s nightmare and original zombie apocalypse film, George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* (#35), as a political allegory of a divided, TV-transfixed, racist America.

Essentially thought experiments, these genre films differ in their imaginative metaphor from more down-to-earth political entertainments-cum-exposés that, in addition to *JFK*, include two other thrillers dealing with political assassination: *Z*, set in the early '60s, and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (#14), made in 1970 and set in the fascist 1930s. The opposite of imaginative political scenarios are movies made to commemorate. The Top 50 included three monumental examples. The most cited was Claude Lanzmann's ninth-place *Shoah*, a nine-and-a-half-hour portrait of Holocaust witnesses and survivors.

Five-hours-plus and, at #17, the highest-ranked twenty-first-century film (as well as only one of four movies in the Top 100 set in the nineteenth century), Peter Watkins's *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (2000) restaged the Paris Commune as it might have been reported on live TV. *The Battle of Chile* (1975–79), Patricio Guzmán's three-part, four-and-a-half-hour chronicle of the 1973 coup against elected socialist leader Salvador Allende, also finished in the Top 20, along with Alain Resnais's short *Night and Fog* (1956) and Ava DuVernay's *Selma*, commemorating Martin Luther King Jr.'s crusade for voting rights.

As befits its spot atop the poll, *The Battle of Algiers* is both commemoration and scenario (and also, thanks in part to Ennio Morricone's thrilling score, entertainment). On one hand, the movie is appreciated for its seemingly objective documentary realism. On the other, it has been taken as a metaphor for urban guerrilla warfare in Vietnam, Iraq, and the United States, understood as a warning and even an instruction manual—a source of inspiration for radical groups like the Black Panthers and an object of study by the Pentagon and the CIA.

A **POLITICAL FILM IS** political not only for what it shows but for what it does. "The problem," according to Jean-Luc Godard, who led the poll in titles with six films nominated in addition to *La Chinoise,* "is not to make political films but to make films politically."

Thus, *Salt of the Earth* was made by blacklisted Hollywood writers and directors, Chantal Akerman's thirty-sixth-ranked *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) with an almost all-female crew, and Jafar Panahi's unranked *This Is Not a Film* (2011) under a form of house arrest when he was forbidden to make movies. Plug pulled by its Hollywood studio, the 1974 anti-Vietnam War documentary *Hearts and Minds* (#39) was self-distributed, albeit by wealthy independents. Oscar Micheaux, the most independent (and impoverished) of independent filmmakers, did not receive a single vote—not even for *God's Step Children* (1938), likely the only movie in American history banned by the U.S. Communist Party—although his successor Melvin Van Peebles did get two votes for his one-man *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971).

Produced by Sam Greenlee from his own novel, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* was financed mostly by Black investors and directed and scored by Black artists. Several scenes of urban insurrection used Gary, Indiana, one of the first large American cities to elect a Black mayor, as a stand-in for Chicago. Like *Salt of the Earth*, it was hounded by the FBI (with theaters subjected to intimidation), and like *Hearts and Minds*, it was abandoned by its distributor. Unlike either, however, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* became a cult film, leading a fugitive existence circulating on bootleg VHS tapes.

Some took *The Battle of Algiers* as a manual. The period's other great Third Worldist film, #32 *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), clandestinely made by Octavio Getino and Fernando E. Solanas in the late 1960s, was designed to instruct. What began as a reform-minded short grew into a four-hour-plus history of left-wing Peronism fashioned largely from interviews and newsreel footage. Dangerous to show in its native Argentina even as it provocatively addressed spectator passivity, *Furnaces* was structured to create space for discussion.

Nearly six hours long, made for but buried by French television, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* integrates that discussion within itself in its critique of the medium. Arguably the most original political film since *Battleship Potemkin*, if not *The Birth of a Nation*, *La Commune* is doubly pedagogical—made to educate its participants as well as its audience. The movie was shot in chronological order in approximately two weeks, after 16 months of preproduction during which the large cast, many of whom were political activists, had to research their characters. Actors merged with their characters as the events of 1871 reflected the situation of France in 2000.

However unusual, these politically made films are all professional motion pictures. A whole other stratum, all but unrecognized in the poll, dates to the early 1930s, with the footage of strikes and demonstrations shot by the Communist-allied Workers Film and Photo League and its European analogues. Not simply documentaries, these films were organizing tools meant to be shown in union halls and at political gatherings. This activist tradition was revived and elaborated in the late 1960s by various New Left collectives, including Newsreel, Third World Newsreel, and the Medvedkin Group, as well as other exponents of what Cuban theorist Julio García Espinosa called "imperfect cinema."

As so-called guerrilla newsreels were facilitated by lightweight 16-millimeter and later video cameras, the development of the camera-phone in the early twenty-first century created a new sort of political cinema. The 2009 Iranian "Green Movement" and the Arab Spring and Syrian civil war that broke out two years later brought short, phone-made video newsreels and political statements, often uploaded to YouTube. The British filmmaker Peter Snowdon curated a number of these "vernacular videos" in his 2013 feature, *The Uprising*. The French journalist David Dufresne went a step further with his 2020 documentary, *The Monopoly of Violence*, using vernacular videos produced during the *gilets jaunes* demonstrations in France to create a dialogue among police, demonstrators, and the official media. (Dufresne was live-streaming demonstrations during the recent mass protests.)

Political cinema is no longer the province of professionals, if indeed it ever was. One respondent put the 26-second, 8-millimeter Zapruder footage, taken in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963, third on their list, behind *Shoah* and *Triumph of the Will*. If the Zapruder footage illuminated history, Darnella Frazier's 10-minute phone-camera documentation of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police in 2020 changed it.

There is a case to be made that, along with the various amateur recordings of the January 6 storming of Congress, Frazier's 10-minute film belongs with the most significant political documentaries made in America over the past few years, if not ever. Because the personal really is the political.

J. Hoberman *was a staff writer and film critic at* The Village Voice *for three decades. He currently teaches a yearly seminar in the film department at Columbia University and has written over a dozen books, including* The Red Atlantis: Communist Culture in the Absence of Communism *and, most recently,* Make My Day: Movie Culture in the Age of Reagan.

The New Republic *thanks Hoberman for curating this special issue and Julian Epp for his Stakhanovite (as Eisenstein might have put it) labors on its behalf.*

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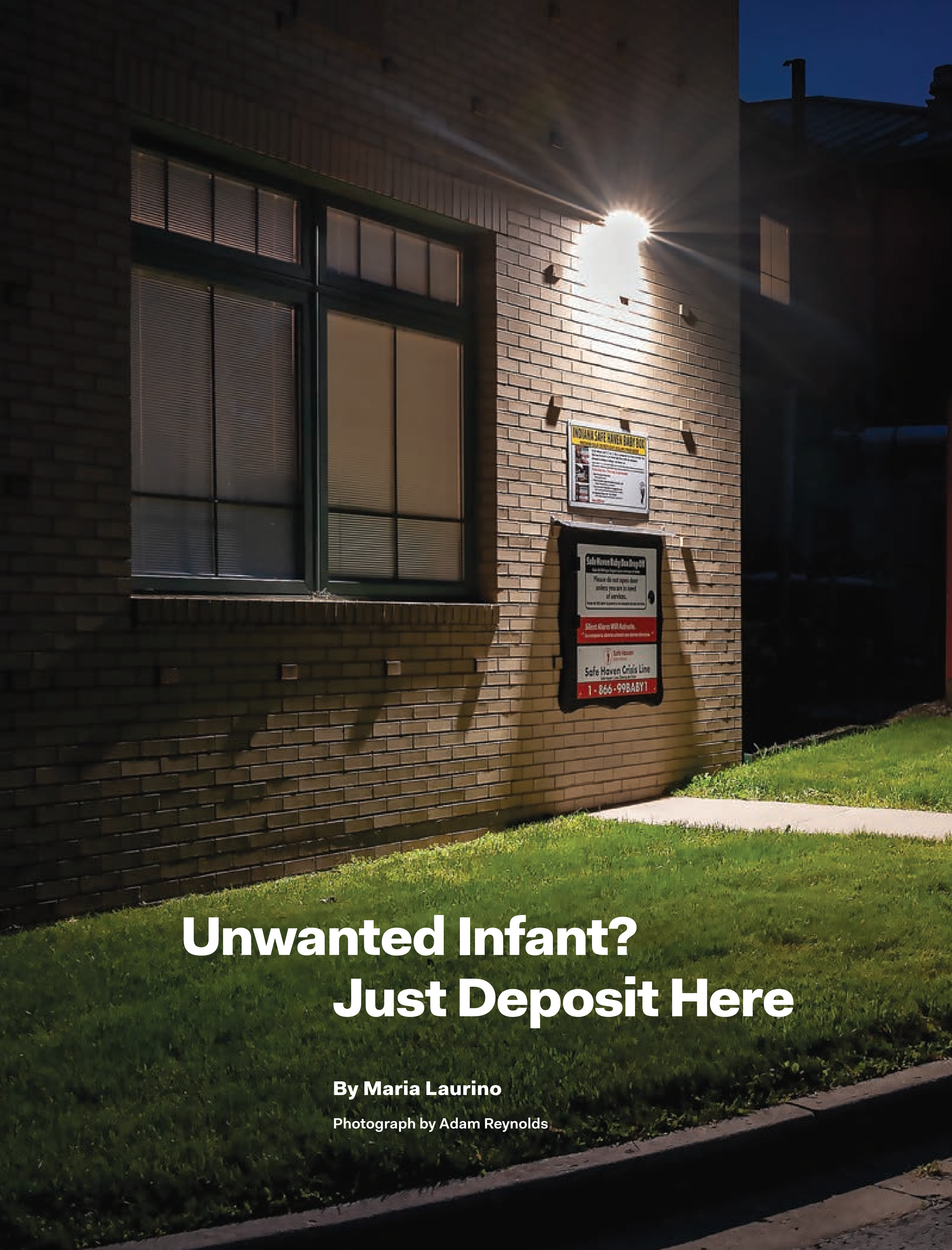
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Unwanted Infant? Just Deposit Here

By Maria Laurino

Photograph by Adam Reynolds

To the right, it's a "clean" alternative to abortion—mothers can just drop their babies off in fire station boxes.

And it's spreading across the country.

How did a desperate and once criminal act get turned into a good thing?

The safe haven baby box on the exterior of Carmel Fire Department Station 45, outside Indianapolis

Last fall, in those early months of dazed disbelief over the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a local Ohio television reporter stood in front of one of the state's eight installed "safe haven baby boxes," places where mothers can anonymously relinquish their newborns. Her plaintive expression belied her breezy demeanor and cheery chartreuse dress. The reporter's unease did not stem from a sadness at the idea that a mother would dispose of a newborn in such a fashion. In fact, quite the opposite: It arose over a deep concern that mothers were being *prevented* from abandoning their newborns. The use of this baby box at a fire station in the city of Troy had been threatened, she told her viewers, because of a citizen's complaint to the state health department charging that it failed to comply with necessary codes.

The reporter from WKEF, a station owned and operated by the conservative Sinclair Broadcast Group, shared the fire department's frustration: "It is *so* easy to use," she explained. "All parents have to do is come in, open this lever here and place the baby inside an environment that is temperature-controlled, and there's air flowing. Now once this lever over here is pulled, 911 is immediately dialed, and law enforcement comes here to this location to pick up the child and take it to the area hospital."

The race by the anti-abortion movement to install safe haven baby boxes across the country has accelerated post-*Dobbs* from zero to 60. More than a dozen states have put forth bills to broaden the use of these devices. The Ohio Department of Health greenlit the Troy baby box a mere three days after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe*. Print and broadcast media spread the word of the public abandonment of a baby like celebratory national birth announcements: "A Kentucky infant last week became the first in the state to be left at a 'baby box' under a new state law permitting the anonymous drop-off of newborns," cooed the *New York Post* in February, the story also reported by CNN, CBS, and, of course, Fox News. "There is no one to stop them. There really is no one to stop them," said Greg Luce, a Minnesota-based attorney who founded the Adoptee Rights Law Center, repeating his words in disbelief of what he'd witnessed. Controlling the debate by declaring that a baby could die without the presence of one of these "newborn safety devices," the right is readying for a future where fire station baby boxes are as common as hose and ladder.

Even more disturbingly, Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito and Amy Coney Barrett both cited "safe haven" laws, the legal mechanism allowing new mothers to surrender their infants anonymously, without fear of criminal prosecution, as a "modern" development, in Alito's words in *Dobbs*, that obviated the need for abortion. Over the last quarter-century, the anti-abortion movement has maneuvered public policy with an acute understanding that one means to achieve their long-dreamed-of goal of a total ban on abortion is to portray adoption as the only humane solution to unwanted pregnancies. And safe haven laws and baby boxes fit perfectly into this agenda.

For the uninitiated, safe haven baby boxes resemble large ovens—steel door contraptions that unlock to reveal an interior door containing a plastic bin lined with a thin cushion, the place into which a mother can anonymously deposit her newborn. The act of abandoning an infant to a public space, once a crime, today is an invitation for traumatized mothers coaxed by young, blonde-haired reporters in bright green dresses to place their baby inside and walk away. Neighboring Indiana, educational home of Barrett, lifelong hearth of Mike Pence, and now baby box capital of America, has installed 98 of the country's 148 safe haven boxes, and the number keeps growing.

"We've had a record year," boasted Monica Kelsey, founder of Safe Haven Baby Boxes, in a video posted on Facebook just a couple of weeks after the overturning of *Roe*. "We've had a total of six babies in Indiana, one baby in Arkansas." In addition to these "seven babies in boxes," she enthused, one Indiana town set a new record—three babies had been abandoned within six weeks to "the same stinkin' box in Carmel!" You see, *it is so easy to use....*

How did this happen? How did a desperate and once criminal act get turned into a good thing?

America's safe haven laws and baby boxes, a manifestation of the medieval Italian system of anonymous infant abandonment, are among the most vivid modern expressions of the Roman Catholic Church's centuries-long shaming of women for their sexuality and assertion of control over their bodies. An ultra-conservative Catholic Supreme Court majority used safe haven laws in part to justify ending abortion—and in doing so widened a trap, into which too many progressives had stepped. The potential consequences—for our politics, yes, but mainly for the emotional and psychological health of these mothers and their children—are chilling.

THE IDEA BEHIND safe haven laws was to stop maternal infanticide, the extraordinarily rare, headline-grabbing story of a newborn found in a garbage can. The movement quickly gained steam after the first safe haven law, also known as the "Baby Moses" law, passed in Texas in 1999, signed by Governor George W. Bush. By the next decade, safe havens would become law in all 50 states.

Legislators approved them rapidly, often with bipartisan support and little inquiry into the long-term consequences of anonymous abandonment on birth mothers and their children, and in all likelihood without an understanding of how anonymous surrender had been used historically to control the reproductive behavior of women. In several states, Planned Parenthood and NOW added a collaborative voice, joining their usual adversaries. Planned

10
Una culla PER LA VITA
passo carrabile
Una culla per la vita

The Culla per la Vita (Cradle for Life) infant drop-off in Milan, Italy. Photograph by Francesco Merlini

Parenthood of Northern New England went even further: It designated all of its Vermont health centers safe haven locations welcoming relinquished infants up to 30 days old. In both a naïve attempt to find common ground with the anti-abortion movement by showing support for adoption and a political dodge to avoid the accusation of allowing babies to get dumped in garbage cans, too many on the left acquiesced to the safe haven movement. The jaw-dropping decision of Planned Parenthood to print brochures announcing that its Vermont clinics doubled as infant abandonment centers most likely emerged from a squishy concept of choice—as if it were just another hue added to the palette of pregnancy options. (Planned Parenthood didn't respond to my request for comment.)

One of the few people back then to question this near-unanimous fervor was Carol Sanger, a Columbia University law professor specializing in reproductive rights. Her journey to understand what was happening in state legislatures began, of all places, on a New Jersey Transit train. Looking out the window, she encountered a billboard emblazoned with the words NO SHAME. NO BLAME. NO NAMES, accompanied by an 800-hotline number. The billboard startled the legal scholar, long attentive to how law regulates mothers' decisions to separate from their children. Had she just in a passing glance witnessed the state of New Jersey urging women to abandon their babies? The traumatic act of anonymous surrender reduced to a catchy slogan?

But by then the safe haven train had already left the station, with seemingly everyone on board. Acts of public abandonment, however, were not a particularly pressing social issue—in 1998, the year before the Texas law passed, a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that of nearly four million live births, 105 babies had been abandoned in public places, with 33 found dead.

Each was a tragedy, but maternal filicide falls low on the register of reasons for infant death. Far more pressing and less sensational causes—low birth weight, preterm birth, and pregnancy-related disease complications—did not receive as much enthusiastic attention from impassioned legislators. (Nor has the death of

Tracing the genealogy of safe haven laws and baby boxes requires traveling back to thirteenth-century Italy, home of the original abandonment wheel, the *ruota*. Desperate mothers placed their babies in these cylindric devices and, with a single turn, the infant left the mother forever, deposited inside a foundling home.

children from gun violence, along with its profound psychological toll, forever etched into public consciousness after the Columbine school shooting massacre in 1999, the same year the Baby Moses law passed in Texas.) And because safe haven laws exist on the premise of anonymity, they can feed a culture of shame and concealment, one that can create a destructive spiral leading women to forgo counseling and maternal care, the primary ways to address infant mortality.

"The need for anonymous abandonment in 2006 puzzles and disturbs," Sanger wrote in a prescient *Columbia Law Review* article published that year. "After all, subsistence levels in the United States are satisfactory, contraception is generally available, and abortion is legal. Single motherhood is less stigmatized, and the institutions of adoption and foster care are well established. How is it then that against a menu of medical, social, and legal alternatives, concealed pregnancy and infanticide have made such a comeback?"

The legislative zeal, especially on the part of Republicans, suggested that something else was happening. What may have begun as a media-induced frenzy over a handful of reported cases of infanticide soon became a shrewd mechanism for the anti-abortion movement to recast the debate by linking the act of infanticide to the decision to have an abortion. Emphasizing the urgent need for safe havens helped paint a dark portrait of a country in moral decline, where madwomen emerge from the attic and Medea crosses the border to the United States. Monstrous mothers—mothers, that is, who kill, or callously abandon, their infants—exhibit a depravity not far on this warped continuum from another type of woman, the one who ends her pregnancy. It's a line of thinking that has culminated today in the concept of "fetal personhood" as the movement pushes for a total ban on abortion.

Sanger's article not only saw behind the laws but predicted their inevitable outcome: "By connecting," she concluded, "infant life to unborn life and infanticide to abortion, Safe Haven laws work subtly to promote the political goal of the culture of life: the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*." Safe haven laws both framed abortion as murder and offered a "moral" alternative to abortion: Women stripped of choice could perform the selfless act of giving up their child for adoption.

The phrase "culture of life" became part of the Republican vernacular after Pope John Paul II used it in an encyclical in 1995. He asserted its necessity in the face of a growing "culture of death," of which abortion was a major culprit. (The pope also believed that condoms were part of the "culture of death," even if used to prevent fatal infection.) The Republican Party included the Vatican dictum in its 2004 platform, and President George W. Bush tied it like a bow around his anti-abortion agenda, uniting evangelicals and conservative Catholics and hindering scientific progress by eliminating funding on new stem cell lines. The pope's words marked the second time in the second half of the twentieth century that Vatican language shaped the message of America's anti-abortion movement. Most famously, Pope Pius XII introduced the term "right to life" in his 1951 encyclical to midwives, a phrase that became the movement's post-*Roe* rallying cry. The child in the womb, he wrote, "has the right to life *directly* from God and not from his parents, not from any society or human authority."

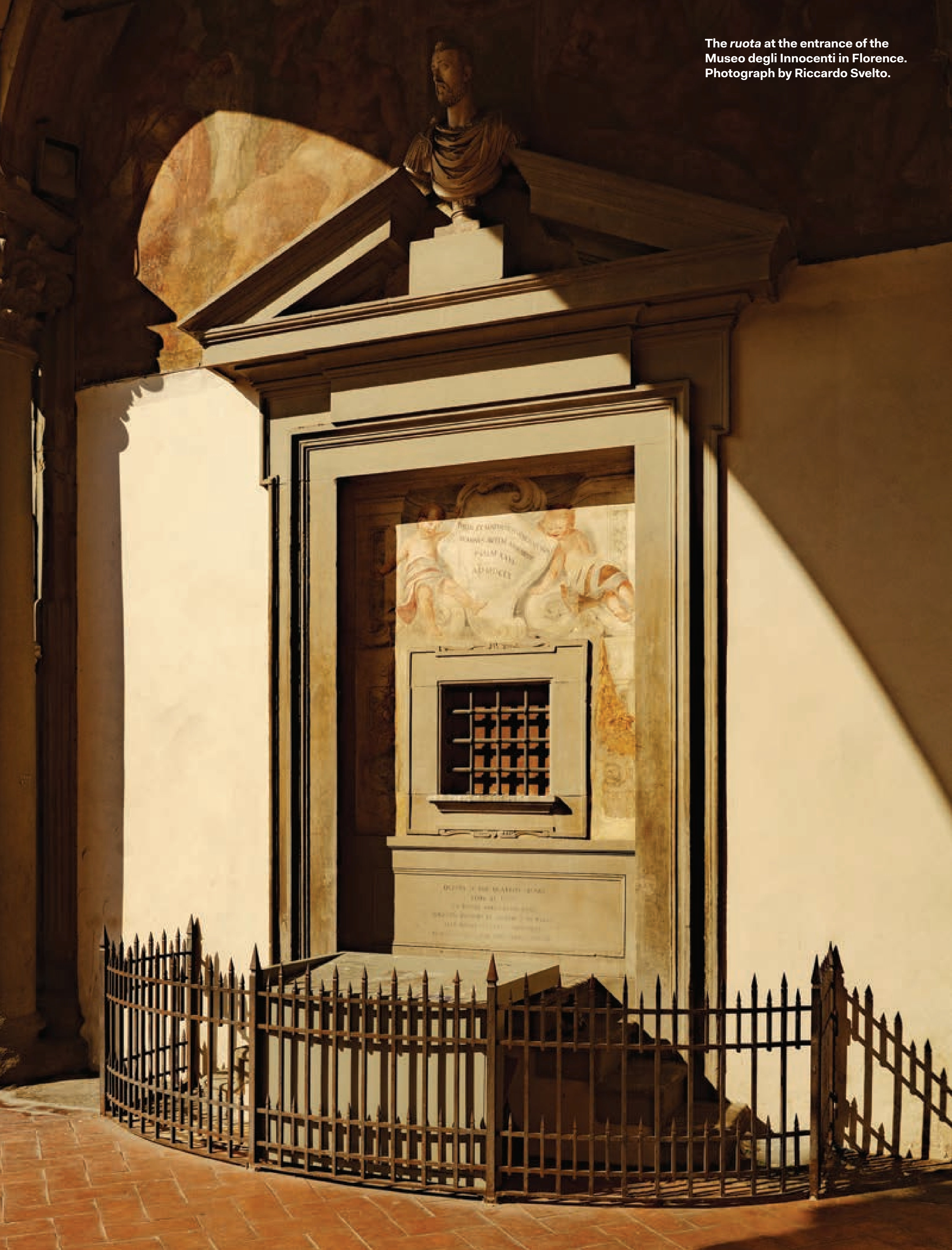
AT THE START of the millennium, during a more generous time for women's reproductive freedom, safe haven "baby boxes" to accompany the newly passed laws did not yet exist. The boxes arrived in the United States in 2016, brought by Monica Kelsey, an Indiana resident and herself an abandoned infant. Kelsey introduced the idea after seeing this type of device in Cape Town, South Africa, three years prior, where she had been invited to give an abstinence talk at a church.

The motto etched on each unit's interior hatch—SAVING BABIES ONE BOX AT A TIME—lends insight into what lawmakers may have been thinking when they feverishly passed safe haven laws in the prior decade. How could any decent-minded person challenge a temperature-controlled unit, rather than, as the Troy fire department chief suggested, a "cardboard box in front of our doors that we might not know is there until we check in the morning"?

Kelsey may have believed she was copying her innovation from South Africa, but tracing the genealogy of safe haven laws and baby boxes requires traveling back to thirteenth-century Italy, home of the original abandonment wheel, the *ruota*. Desperate single mothers placed their babies in these cylindric devices and, with a single turn, the infant left the mother forever, deposited inside a foundling home.

In 2006, Italy's anti-abortion movement, communicating the Vatican message of the "culture of life," reintroduced the *ruota* in a high-tech, temperature-controlled version, rebranding the ancient wheel as the *culla per la vita*, cradle for life, and installing them throughout Italy. In the United States, Kelsey charges between $11,000 and $16,000 for her copy, the less cleverly named "baby box," along with leasing fees. (On her website, she also sells $45 tumblers displaying the safe haven logo.)

Americans may tend to think of Italy as the land of *mamma e bambini*, brimming with maternal love—in contrast to the ascetic Irish soul that conjured up the Magdalene Laundries. But it was the Italian church that led the Western world in determining



The *ruota* at the entrance of the Museo degli Innocenti in Florence. Photograph by Riccardo Svelto.

what kind of woman was fit to be a mother. In the Middle Ages, the church invented the law of anonymous surrender to prevent infanticide, just as America's "modern" safe haven laws—under Alito's "War is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength" logic—purport to do. Soon the practice of surrendering babies to wheels spread from Italy to most of Catholic Europe and Russia, becoming a mechanism to control the reproductive behavior of women. In other words, the Roman Catholic Church, not the U.S. Constitution, laid the originalist argument for safe haven laws and baby boxes.

For centuries, the church kept women under surveillance—as Texas and Oklahoma laws offering bounties to citizens who report abortions do today—requiring midwives to inform priests of all out-of-wedlock births. Mothers considered unfit were forced to surrender their babies to foundling homes run by the church and financed by the state. Brown University professor and Pulitzer Prize–winning historian David Kertzer described in his book on the Italian infant abandonment system, *Sacrificed for Honor*, how over half of surrendered babies died before their first birthday, a rate more than double that of the general population, from disease and from malnutrition due to a lack of wet nurses. Over this period, before the invention of infant formula, hundreds of thousands of infants died. But the church rationalized removing babies from the nourishing breasts of their "sinful" mothers to starve in foundling homes because the babies were protected by baptism—saved from sin on Earth. Kertzer quotes a nineteenth-century reformer who suggested the motto HERE CHILDREN ARE KILLED AT PUBLIC EXPENSE be placed above the doors of every foundling institution.

Pressure from reformers closed the barbaric wheels at the end of the nineteenth century. In Florence today, the Museo degli Innocenti stands in the space of the city's former foundling home. Contained inside are tarnished relics of this sorry past. In its most heartrending section, a physical manifestation of the broken mother-child bond, 144 teak drawers slide open to display delicate objects that had been severed in half. These tokens, called *segnali di riconoscimento*, signs of recognition, taken from the museum's collection of 40,000, include crucifixes, medals, and holy pictures. Each severed piece had been pinned to the swaddled infant in the small hope that the mother, who kept the other half, could one day reclaim the child she anonymously surrendered. In a chilling American parallel to the Italian system, when safe haven laws passed at the dawn of the twenty-first century, some states gave mothers an identifying token or bracelet as a keepsake for possible future reunification. But Sanger pointed out the legal caveat: "Possession of the matching token does not assure the child's return—it simply creates a presumption of standing to participate in a custody hearing."

To look back to the ancient origins of safe haven laws and baby boxes is not merely to provide a curious historic footnote, but to offer a cautionary tale of how the past dwells in the present and finds new routes to shape the future. Although the wheels closed, Italy's foundling home system remained opened (sans wheel) up into *the 1980s*, and between 1950 and 1970 the country sent thousands of anonymously surrendered children to the United States for adoption. Over seven centuries later, the wheel's foundational logic remained in place—the emphasis on the unwed mother's right to secrecy in order to veil her shame, the complete lack of responsibility assigned to the father, and the ecclesiastical and lay belief that religious authorities could better determine the proper upbringing for these unfortunate babies—the ones, that is, who survived.

Left in Italy's wreckage are countless twentieth-century women who, deprived of reproductive choices, found themselves trapped in situations outside their control, some tricked, lied to, even told their baby had died to smooth the adoption process. Their children were denied their birth identity, vital family medical history, and made to believe that their mothers had heartlessly abandoned them. Only when birth control and abortion became legal in the '70s and the stigma of unwed motherhood diminished did the institutions' doors finally shut, along with the international and domestic adoption pipeline this system abetted. Although Italian women could sign their names to relinquishment papers, the church preferred anonymity to make lineage untraceable. The State's Registrar of Births falsified the children's birth certificates, printing fictitious names on legal documents.

The Italian experience affords a rearview mirror account of our country's ongoing crisis created when the state imposes laws based on church teachings. When a Catholic conservative Supreme Court majority overturns *Roe*; when states seek to send both providers and pregnant women to jail; when new mothers, cornered by life circumstances and absent necessary resources, have no choice but to relinquish the baby they nurtured in their womb to a hospital, church, or fire station baby box—these are the violent marks of the exploding star of religious fervor that has crashed onto public policy.

More than 800 years later, anonymous surrender remains in Italy's legal code, despite centuries of efforts by reformers to repeal it. The country "still is not ready" to abandon the law, Anna Arecchia, who heads the Committee for the Right to One's Birth Origins, told me. And now anonymous surrender, i.e., safe haven law, is ensconced in every U.S. state. What neither liberal lawmakers who offered a bipartisan handshake, nor Democratic-controlled legislatures, nor NOW or Planned Parenthood understood was that they had unwittingly introduced the ideological extension of thousands of years of Catholic Church thinking about women, sex, and sin into U.S. jurisprudence.

"This is deeply embedded in Catholicism," said Frances Kissling, president of the Center for Health, Ethics, and Social Policy and a former nun. "This is about the fact that you had sex that you were not entitled to have, and in one form or another we are going to punish you for that. And one of the punishments ... is to take your baby away."

THE NUMBER OF INFANTS relinquished to safe haven locations since the early 2000s is hard to discern, because the federal government doesn't compile such statistics. Nor has the government published another official tally of babies left in public places since the 1998 study. (An unpublished follow-up written in 2010 cited 83 infants in 2006.) To date, the number of newborns placed into baby boxes appears to be tiny, a little over a couple of dozen, a figure gleaned from news reports and pro-baby-box social media. But those dozen-plus states considering expanding the use of baby boxes mean it's far too early in our post-*Dobbs* land of re-criminalized abortion to know how many children will end up relinquished to baby boxes; or, through the use of safe haven laws, to designated sites like hospitals and churches; or how they

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will fare. And the troubled lives of the women who gave birth to them, along with the slim options for reclaiming their children, rarely find a space in the public imagination.

The oldest babies surrendered through safe haven laws would now be in their twenties, but unless a mother volunteered information, there is no original birth record. "The damage of safe haven laws is there, and even the work I do doesn't touch those cases, because in many cases there was not a birth record," explained Greg Luce. "Or the birth record is called a foundling certificate, where your place of birth is where you were found, and your father or your mother may be listed as the person who found you. But you can't even get those records at all. The foundling certificates are sealed and completely unavailable."

There is, however, another entry point into understanding the lifelong complexity of anonymous surrender laws for birth mothers and their children, as well as the kinds of abuses their secrecy encourages. Traveling around three-and-a-half hours east of the Troy fire department's endangered safe haven baby box, to the town of Steubenville, Ohio, affords such a periscope view.

Steubenville, with a population today of about 18,000, is a small town with an outsize reputation. It received international attention about a decade ago when two popular high school football players sexually assaulted a 16-year-old girl after she passed out while drinking with them at a party. The players texted photos of the unconscious girl to their friends, who laughed about how "raped" she looked. As the town doubled down to defend the boys, the group Anonymous hacked into their social media accounts, and the texts and video spread around the world, prompting outraged conversations about sexual assault, protecting athletes, and victim shaming. If that distinction (along with being the birthplace of Dean Martin, who, in an era slow to rise to outrage about such matters, crooned, "Baby, it's cold outside") weren't enough, Steubenville holds yet another. In the '50s and '60s, it welcomed an unusually large cluster of more than two dozen Italian children out of thousands adopted by American couples through a program run by the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic Church that supplied children from Italy's opaque infant abandonment system.

Few people, even in Italy, know today that more than 3,700 children arrived in the United States on commercial airlines—far more than the children adopted from Ireland's Magdalene Laundry system—between 1950 and 1970. During this time, tens of thousands of unwed Italian mothers were forced by religious, social, and economic pressure to relinquish their babies. (In the program's most delicious irony, these children sent to the United States to be exculpated from sin spent their first night before meeting their new parents at Manhattan's Chelsea Hotel, infamous for its debauchery, but also a convenient 10-minute walk from where the offices of the Catholic Committee for Refugees once stood.) The children arrived under a refugee status, marketed first as "war orphans" and in later years as "orphans," although almost all had two living parents.

Those thousands of children helped serve a Vatican postwar social experiment—removing Italy's unfortunate "illegitimates" to be raised by couples in America's land of plenty. The childless American couples needed to demonstrate, in the words of the monsignor in charge of the "orphan program" in Rome, an "impeccable Catholicity." Adult adoptees from Steubenville have only recently learned, after finding one another through an online group, that the boy they waited for the school bus with or the girl they sang next to in high school choir had, like them, spent their first years in an Italian foundling institution before being replanted into America's Catholic heartland. It's a discovery that "completely blows my mind," several adoptees repeated.

I stumbled upon this story several years ago because of a chance phone call from my cousin, in which he offhandedly mentioned that he had joined an online group for people like him, born in Italy and adopted in the United States through a Catholic Church program. He began telling me stories he'd heard from other adoptees about the treatment of birth mothers and children—stories that disturbed me.

My interest piqued, I asked my cousin, flown to the United States in 1959 at nine months old to be adopted by my father's niece, a nurse, and her husband, a popular Steubenville doctor, to connect me with the American adoptee who created this group. Soon I was talking to John Campitelli, a Cornell-trained engineer and IT provider. Anonymously surrendered in Turin, Italy, in 1963 and adopted by an American couple in 1965, Campitelli began searching for his birth mother at the tender age of 11, finding her two arduous decades later. He learned how nuns had lied when his mother hoped to reclaim him, sending her away from the foundling home where she had been forced by religious and family pressure to surrender her son, whom she named Piero, days after his birth. Her son, they told the 23-year-old mother, was already in the United States with "a good family." In truth, he lingered in the institution for two-and-a-half years.

My cousin, also named John, had been surrendered to the same Turin institution. One summer night, I talked with him and four other Steubenville adoptees, all members of Campitelli's group, in an extended Zoom call. The screen, uniting adoptees who long ago moved from Steubenville, allowed me entrée into the lived experience of the dozens of children who had arrived from Italy into this tight-knit Midwestern town. Mary, the youngest and among the last of the children sent to the United States in 1968, was the firebrand among them, most vocal in calling out

The anti-abortion movement is using adopted children as its political football. The only moral solution to an unwanted pregnancy, this thinking asserts, is for women to do the right thing: carry the baby to term and relinquish the child for adoption.

the harm inflicted by the absence of any support network for these families. As the adoptees shared what little information they knew about their early years in Italy and reminisced about growing up in Steubenville, the conversation had the feel of part support network, the kind Mary wished had existed in their youth, and part reunion, even if some were meeting for the first time.

Mary also retreated at times that evening, becoming very quiet as she listened to the stories of others and reflected on her own. Mary bears a double burden, because she had been adopted with her younger brother. Her parents had intended to adopt only the six-month-old boy but were persuaded by local priests to take his toddler sister. "I'm the two-for-one special," Mary quipped, but also the family's sole survivor.

"He hated the whole fact that he was adopted," Mary said. "He wanted nothing to do with it." She still has difficulty talking about her brother 30 years after his suicide devastated their family. There were other circumstances, such as her brother struggling with issues of his sexuality, which began in high school and continued into college. "But I think adoption really played heavy on that, and later after his suicide I learned that there are mental health issues in my biological family," she said. "I'm like … what do I do with all these mental health issues? It scares me sometimes, even to this day." As family stories were shared, the complex choice confronting the adopted child—whether or not to search for one's past—surfaced repeatedly. It was summed up in a succinct exchange between an adoptee who wondered whether looking for his origins would be "opening up a can of worms" (my cousin shares this point of view), and another named Marco, who retorted, "I'll open that damn can. I'm pretty stubborn."

Marco, married and a father of four, turned 66 in April and is still trying to open that damn can. Although Marco, like my cousin, and like John Campitelli, had a close and supportive relationship with his adoptive parents (Marco's father was the best man at his wedding), he has spent a lifetime hoping to discover who brought him into the world, and if he has any siblings. For his birthday this year, he traveled to Sardinia, where he was born and spent two-and-a-half years in a foundling home, for the first time since then. Marco has never been able to uncover the story of his birth mother. A nun told him when he was around 15 that she died during childbirth. It was a pat line fed to other questioning children, and it made his birthdays from that point on bittersweet, since Marco held himself responsible for killing his mother.

His two official identifying documents, an Italian birth certificate and passport, informed him that he was born Marco Santelli and initiated a decades-long quest to learn more. He met a fellow Santelli on an ancestry site, and even traveled to the Florida retirement home where she lived. When she persuaded Marco to attend a large Santelli family reunion in Toronto, he agreed, flying there with his wife. It turned out, though, that it was all a waste of time. Only after meeting John Campitelli, who explained to Marco that he was anonymously surrendered, did this adoptee discover that his birth certificate had been falsified by Italy's Registrar of Births.

The person assigned to his files might have chosen the name "Marco Santelli" as an antidote to the sins of his mother, renaming him a devout little saint, *santo*, born on April 27, two days after the *Festa di San Marc*o. But in the back-to-Earth reality of one's life, this mythical falsification of an official document, embossed on a passport bringing the child into the United States, resulted more than four decades later in Marco traveling nearly 3,000 miles, from Ohio to Florida to Toronto, all in the vain effort to find a family connection to a family that never existed.

Despite the celebratory coos in the United States today about anonymously abandoned infants rescued at safe haven baby boxes, Marco's story is one of countless tales of adopted children around the world who have wanted to find their birth mothers—along with mothers hoping to find children they were forced or tricked into giving up—only to be frustrated at every step by deliberate falsifications and sealed records. Even DNA testing has failed to give Marco any helpful leads.

Milan-based psychologist Francesco Vadilonga, who works with adoptees seeking their biological families, told me that searches often are triggered not just by the desire to find the women who brought them into the world, but by a belief that a piece of oneself has been lost. The culture of adoption in Italy, Vadilonga explained, long veiled in secrecy because of anonymous surrender, reinforces the desire to shut the door to the past, and with records mandated by the courts to be sealed for 100 years, it leaves adoptees with few options but to accept this erasure.

ADOPTION IS THE new front line in the ongoing battle for women's bodily autonomy, and the anti-abortion movement is using adopted children as its political football. The only moral solution to an unwanted pregnancy, this thinking asserts, is for women to do the right thing: carry the baby to term and relinquish the child for adoption.

The handmaiden of this argument is Amy Coney Barrett, who was educated and who later taught at Notre Dame Law School, which helped develop the Catholic conservative legal thinking in the anti-abortion movement. She stunned pro-choice advocates during oral arguments for *Dobbs* in December 2021 when she asked why, if a woman can have an abortion at 23 weeks, the state cannot require her to carry the baby for 15 or 16 more weeks. Barrett suggested that because safe haven laws allow women to terminate parental rights as early as 48 hours after birth, they eliminate the need for abortion through the act of anonymous surrender that provides a route to adoption.

The left hadn't considered this argument in the game of chess over *Roe*: that a member of America's highest court would justify forcing a woman to carry to term with the blithe notion that she can always abandon her baby to the box at the local fire station. In fact, after the rapid passage of safe haven legislation, many didn't think about these laws at all. "I think that some people, even in our field, were like, 'Wait, what exactly are safe haven laws?'" a reproductive health researcher told me about the reaction to Barrett's questions.

"Democrats, or generally those who supported the right to an abortion, have been hoodwinked," said Luce about liberal politicians' failure over the last quarter-century to recognize the danger of the safe haven movement. "And it's come back to really bite them hard, now that we're seeing the expansion of these baby boxes and safe haven laws." Marley Greiner, co-founder of the adoptee rights group Bastard Nation, was one of the few to oppose safe haven laws from the start. "We had no idea how far this would go, and nobody ever expected boxes," said Greiner, who tracks with Luce the 19 states currently authorizing the use of the boxes. These adoptees are trying to halt the dismantling of a half-century of hard-fought rights and recognize the cruelty of a society that fails to offer economic or emotional support to pregnant women in need but encourages them to relinquish their children. "Baby boxes send the message that women demand anonymity, that sealed records or anonymous birth is what women what, and it makes it more difficult for us to unseal records," said Greiner.

Adoptees understand firsthand the pain of sealed records and America's own callous treatment of birth mothers. The postwar years came to be known as the "baby scoop" era, when an estimated 1.5 million women, predominantly white, young, and middle class, disappeared to maternity homes to hide their pregnancies and relinquish their babies for adoption. Back then, rarely was the Old World language of disgraced sinners and deserved punishment heard from social workers who excised Christian religious belief from their professional judging eye. Rather, here in the New World, popularized versions of Freudian theory justified relinquishment: Young mothers were neurotics with pregnancy fantasies that stemmed from a confused sense of womanhood.

By the 1970s, an adoption rights movement, led by people who came of age during the Warren court's expansion of civil rights and civil liberties, blossomed as it demanded an end to secrecy and closed files. One of its leaders, Florence Fisher, explained to *The New York Times* in 1972 why many adoptees undergo searches: "to acquire a history and biological relatedness in a world that has asked us to live a contrived identity in a contrived reality, not just as a child, but for all our lifetime."

The idea of "open" adoptions developed, in which the identities of the birth mother and adoptive parents could be exchanged, along with mutual consent registries enabling adult adoptees and birth parents to place their names into a large, shared database in the hope of finding each other. The obstacles remained large for broken bonds to be mended, but the vital importance of knowing family medical histories and an understanding of the pain suffered in the adoption process came to light. This awareness, combined with the availability of birth control and legalized abortion, resulted in a dramatic decline in the number babies relinquished for adoption.

But that is likely to change now, thanks to *Dobb*s, along with the potential for abuse that existed in a secretive adoption system. Greiner and Luce report that they are already seeing dangerous facets of safe haven concealment. In Indiana, the baby box capital, legislation recently passed both houses that allows for the direct transfer of a newborn from a fire station baby box to a "preapproved" adoption agency without having to notify a state regulatory agency. Adoption proceedings could be initiated a mere 28 days later, with the courts prohibited from inquiring about the parents' absence or reason for relinquishment. Giving an adoption agency full control by eliminating state or court regulation is the kind of abuse that in the past resulted in the trafficking of children. An EMS worker, for example, could be tempted by financial incentive to transfer a baby directly to an adoption agency. The other side of adoption, which no one likes to admit, is its commercial one, with costs that can exceed $50,000 for a healthy newborn.

A land of re-criminalized abortion might well usher in the old stigmas of unwed motherhood, with the "good mother" portrayed as one who surrenders her newborn to an adoptive family with the economic means to properly raise the child. Such stigmas conceal the sad truth that women relinquish their babies because of a drastic lack of choice. The vast majority of women denied access to abortion do not want to give up their child, with about 9 percent relinquishing and the other 91 percent parenting the child, according to the research of Gretchen Sisson, a sociologist at the University of California at San Francisco and author of the forthcoming *Relinquished: The Politics of Adoption and the Privilege of American Motherhood*. "Women are just not interested in giving their child away if any other option is a possibility," Sisson said.

Our post-*Roe* land will force many more women to make these untenable choices. But with an important new addition: anonymous surrender codified into U.S. law. On Easter Sunday, a mother in Italy abandoned her newborn to a *culla per la vita* in central Milan near a large medical complex. Installed in 2007, this "cradle for life" had been used only twice before the 2023 surrender. Although the mother could have anonymously relinquished her newborn at the hospital where she gave birth, instead she chose the high-tech *ruota*.

She included a letter written in her baby's voice, her chosen name for him referenced Aeneas, the mythical hero of Troy: "Hi, my name is Enea. I was born in the hospital because my mom wanted to be sure everything was ok and to be together as much as possible."

This cradle-for-life Easter story, widely reported in Italy, fit not only into the Vatican message of the culture of life, but Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's call for "*Dio, patria, e famiglia*," a motto with its roots, like her hard-right party the Brothers of Italy, in the country's Fascist past.

Back in Troy (Ohio), the Department of Health deemed the baby box compliant and ready again for use. The right cajoled progressives to open the Trojan horse of anonymous surrender, and, soon enough, baby boxes crawled out of the woodwork. With remarkable deftness, the wheels have been set in motion to recommence this most ancient form of female subjugation. A dystopian future portends if we remain on this road the Supreme Court paved and many states already follow. The only way ahead is to stop averting our eyes to what has been before us all along.

Maria Laurino*'s forthcoming book*, The Price of Children, *will be published first in Italy this September.*

Parents are at war over how to interpret—and what to do about—the fentanyl scourge killing their children. Republican politicians are ready to pounce.

THE GREAT OVERDOSE GRIEF DIVIDE

By Zachary Siegel

Illustration by Sara Gironi Carnevale

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THEY HELD PROM PICTURES and high school yearbook cutouts. They wore T-shirts and hoodies emblazoned with faces, names, birthdays—and death dates. They drove from all over California to tell lawmakers that their children were "killed" or "murdered."

Not by random violent criminals, gun-toting gang members, or mass shooters—but by drug dealers.

Inside a drab hearing room in a state Capitol annex, they lined up in front of a tall plexiglass divider to express their support for Senate Bill 44, otherwise known as "Alexandra's Law," which would help prosecutors bring murder charges against convicted drug dealers. For some grieving parents, laws like this represent a path to justice—the only way to punish the people they believe "poisoned" their children in a country that has gone soft against hardened criminals. For others, it's a doomed latter-day embrace of the war on drugs that will only bring more pain and suffering.

On that March morning in Sacramento, Alexandra's surviving parents, Matt and Christine Capelouto, sat eagerly in the gallery waiting for their cause to be taken up by the public safety committee. This was the third time the project named for their daughter had a hearing in three years; twice already, the committee—currently comprising four Democrats and one Republican—had voted it down. Each loss left an army of bereaved parents livid, and none more than the Capeloutos.

"We've allowed drug dealers to become serial killers," Matt Capelouto told me. "It's so hard to hold these drug dealers accountable in states like ours. We need to change that."

They were determined to try again. Christine held a framed picture of Alexandra, smiling big with bright blonde hair, as she gently pleaded for the senators' support. Matt spoke next, the room encased in a quiet tension. He approached the clear divider, looked senators square in the eye, raised his right index finger into the air, and, his voice trembling, intoned, "On behalf of all fentanyl poisoning victims, strong support."

Families like the Capeloutos are adamant that their child did not experience some sort of self-imposed tragedy. Instead, they use the word "poisoned," which makes it clear there is a villain in the mix here—and it certainly was not their kid. "I will never say my daughter died of a drug overdose," Capelouto said, adding, "She was deceived to death." Alexandra Capelouto died in December 2019, when she was 20 years old. She had purchased pills off the social-media app Snapchat that she believed were oxycodone, but turned out to be fentanyl, a much more potent opioid. Investigators believe Alexandra crushed and snorted at least one pill, enough to deliver a fatal dose for someone without a tolerance.

The data shows the Capeloutos' anguish is far from anecdotal: The number of young people dying from fentanyl is spiking in unprecedented fashion.

Alexandra's Law, if passed, would require courts to issue a written admonishment to defendants convicted of a range of fentanyl-related offenses, from possessing for sale to sharing or transporting the drug. The rebuke would alert the defendant that selling or giving away drugs could result in death, and that, if they do it again and somebody dies as a result, they could be on the hook for murder.

The bill falls under a category of controversial "drug-induced homicide" laws that seek to hold drug distributors criminally responsible for overdose deaths. Such laws are not exactly new, but since fentanyl has taken over the drug market, their popularity has exploded. After his daughter's death, Matt Capelouto became president of a foundation called Drug-Induced Homicide, dedicated to passing these kinds of laws. If you visit his foundation's website—druginducedhomicide.org—you will see this question in big block letters pop up on the screen: "Why are drug dealers getting away with MURDER?"

There is another set of parents who share the Capeloutos' grief, but not their response. In fact, they vehemently disagree with activist efforts aimed at dealers. This group is personified by Aimee Dunkle, a bereaved mom from Orange County and a board member of Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing, or GRASP. Dunkle, too, was there in Sacramento on that March morning, and anticipation in the room mounted as she stepped up to the plexiglass divider to argue against the bill. Dunkle acknowledged the shared experience of the parents. ("We may not be united in policy, but we are united in unimaginable pain.") Then she explained how her son Ben's heart stopped beating after he used heroin with a group of friends, and how one of his friends had a

Supporters gathered around Matt Capelouto at the Mission Inn in Riverside, California, in February.

ANJALI SHARIF-PAUL/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE/GETTY

criminal record because of drugs and was afraid to dial 911. “It was not heroin that killed Ben that night,” she said. “It was fear.”

Dunkle said that her son was not murdered; his death was initially investigated as a homicide, but police later ruled it an accident. “The law enforcement officer said to me, ‘Mrs. Dunkle, your son made a choice that night. Nobody forced him to buy heroin.’” The point, if a bit harsh, eventually resonated with Dunkle, who thinks that, instead of deterring drug use or dealing, bills like SB 44 would discourage more people from calling for help if doing so meant the possibility of a future murder charge.

The hearing for Alexandra’s Law exposed a deep and bitter split among thousands of families who have endured a most primal loss. What one mom explained to me as “a great grief divide” runs across the country, with parents disagreeing about the very core meaning of their child’s death. Was their child “poisoned” by a malicious drug dealer who should pay for their crime? Or did their child die from a tragic “overdose” that, with better public health policy and education, could have been prevented? Parents on both sides of the grief divide want their child’s death to mean something.

Inevitably, this parental divide has mapped onto our political divide, and is funneling into a fiery new frontier of America’s cascading culture wars. The right has taken up the cause of the “murder” faction. Some in the GOP have called for bombing clandestine drug labs in Mexico. Donald Trump has made fentanyl a centerpiece of his 2024 campaign, and he wants to swiftly execute drug dealers—the way, he says, they do in China.

Many Democrats and liberals, meanwhile, tend to see in the urge to crack down on dealers—some of whom may not even have known they were selling fentanyl-laced pills—a time warp back to the Reagan era. “Simply making it easier to prosecute someone for murder will not address or solve this problem,” California Senator Steven Bradford, whose district includes Compton and West Compton, said during the March hearing where senators debated Alexandra’s Law. He added, “We’ve seen this movie before—in the ’80s and ’90s—with mass incarceration and zero tolerance in the war on drugs.” This is why the Democratic-controlled committee voted Alexandra’s Law down.

For a long time, public sentiment seemed to be inching toward the latter, more realist view. Nearly a decade ago, polling showed most Americans had soured on harsh tactics against drugs—63 percent believed ending mandatory minimum drug sentences to be “a good thing,” and just 26 percent believed the federal government should prioritize prosecuting people for using “hard drugs.” Now, most Americans still believe the war on drugs to be an abject failure, but fentanyl and all its shocking lethality could be creating some doubt. Recent polling by *The Economist* and YouGov asked Americans whom they blame for the fentanyl crisis, and a vast majority, 74 percent, answered they blame drug dealers the most, as many of these parents do. (China and Mexico tied for second.) As fentanyl deaths reach staggering heights, lawmakers have felt enormous pressure to do something, anything.

And they have. Lawmakers across the country have debated—and, in some cases, passed—harsher fentanyl laws, from new felonies and mandatory minimum sentences for possession to laws that make drug selling akin to murder. Some states have recently hindered public health and harm reduction efforts: Colorado killed a bill that would allow overdose prevention centers, and California’s Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed a similar measure. Idaho voted to limit funding for naloxone, the opioid overdose reversal drug, and West Virginia heavily curtailed syringe access programs. In congressional hearings and statehouses across the country, grieving parents are a common presence. Many say they want “accountability” for drug sellers, and their demands are being heard.

As fentanyl deaths keep surging, more and more parents are finding their way into a bona fide movement to make political sense of the unthinkable. Powered by profound pain, these parents are hell-bent on ending the worst drug crisis ever recorded in U.S. history. What they choose to do with their pain, and who they blame for causing it, could end up leaving a deep imprint on the shape of U.S. drug policy for generations.

That struggle could determine just how many more young people are lost forever.

SITTING IN LOS ANGELES TRAFFIC on a Friday afternoon, Joseph Friedman, an addiction researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles, spouted off a series of terrifying statistics about fentanyl deaths ripping through seemingly every stratum of American life. “There’s never been a modern overdose crisis that’s anything like what we’re seeing in the U.S. right now,” he told me. Unlike heroin, fentanyl is totally synthetic, which means drug traffickers no longer need to pay farmers to cultivate vast fields of poppies. The result is a cheap, abundant, and highly potent opioid feeding America’s voracious demand for pain relief. Friedman explained that young people—and perhaps especially young white people—were once fairly insulated from this crisis, which has spanned more than two decades. But that picture changed around 2019, when a new supply of counterfeit pills hit the scene, particularly on the West Coast. These drugs, dubbed “fentapills” and thought to be made in makeshift labs in Mexico, look like in-demand pharmaceuticals, such as oxycodone and the anti-anxiety drug Xanax.

In 2019, 253 adolescents died from fentanyl-involved overdoses in the United States, according to Friedman’s analysis published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, or JAMA. By 2021, that number had risen to 884 deaths—a 249 percent jump. Factoring in deaths from all opioids among young people aged 15 to 24, more than 6,000 died in 2021 alone. “That’s very epidemiologically novel and unprecedented,” Friedman said. “And there’s no sign that those trends are reversing.” Like any good scientist, Friedman listed numerous caveats. Namely that while the teen death rate is rising fast, young people represent a very small portion of the 100,000 drug-related deaths that now occur every year. By proportion, adults in their thirties to fifties still account for the largest slice of mortality. And the analysis acknowledged it was impossible to account for the social impact of the pandemic. But what’s especially striking to Friedman is the role counterfeit pills are playing in the sudden deaths of young people.

In 2021, over a quarter of all the fentanyl seized by law enforcement was disguised in the form of a pill. Researchers suspect law enforcement only captures a small fraction of the illicit drug supply, and there’s millions upon millions of pills flowing. Many parents had no idea what fentanyl even was, let alone that their child could purchase it on social-media platforms like Snapchat. One question that came up again and again was: Why are young people seeking Xanax and oxycodone from their peers or even complete strangers online? Another: Why are dealers giving them such a deadly chemical instead?

In a political twist, parents like the Capeloutos have formed a frontlash to the backlash against drug enforcement that began when heroin shattered suburban families.

“Americans consume a massive amount of pharmaceuticals,” Friedman told me. “It’s totally normalized.” Kids see their friends and parents take pills for all sorts of ailments, and they think they’re safe. The act of taking a prescription pill can seem innocuous. They have no reason to suspect what they’re buying is ultra-potent fentanyl pressed, molded, and colored as popular pills. Young people experimenting and self-medicating with drugs are nothing new. What is new is how lethal that self-medication and experimentation have become, due to knockoff pills.

Alexandra Capelouto’s story illustrates the horrifying trends Friedman found in his research. She was diagnosed with depression as a teenager, her dad explained to me. “She was a very empathetic young lady,” he said. “She always [bore] other people’s pain on her own shoulders.” When she died, Alexandra was on winter break from Arizona State University, where she was studying sociology; she hoped to one day work in foster care to help children. Days before Christmas, she was at her parents’ home in Temecula, a small, picturesque Southern California city that hosts a wine and hot-air balloon festival every year. She was having trouble sleeping, and she wanted something to help. Capelouto told me that someone Alexandra knew referred her to a man around the same age named Brandon McDowell, whom she reached over Snapchat. McDowell agreed to sell her approximately 11 blue pills, inscribed with “M” on one side and “30” on the other, the same inscription as a generic 30-milligram oxycodone.

On December 23, 2019, Alexandra’s sister, Skye, woke up to the sound of her mother screaming and a door slamming shut. Alexandra’s mom found her, slouched on her bed, sitting in front of a mirror she’d used to put on makeup. Grim scenes like this have played out in thousands of homes across the country. Parents walk into their child’s bedroom and attempt to rouse them awake, only to find that they are long gone. Alongside smartphones, headphones, and laptops where they streamed their favorite shows and movies before bed, remnants of drugs are found: crushed powder, rolled-up dollar bills, a handful of pills.

According to Matt Capelouto, the local criminal justice system had no answers for his daughter’s demise. Her death was deemed an accident, and legally the deck was stacked against a homicide case. As of 2019, California was one of 27 states without a drug-induced homicide law on the books, and though California prosecutors can still charge dealers with murder, they must be able to prove malice—that the dealer knew what they were selling was deadly, and that they sold it anyway. That’s what Alexandra’s Law is meant to fix: The admonishment solves the problem of having to prove malice.

Capelouto essentially thinks he got lucky when federal prosecutors took up the case. Though they didn’t file a murder charge, prosecutors initially indicted McDowell on a charge of “distributing fentanyl resulting in death,” which carries a 20-year mandatory minimum sentence. “You can’t tell me that locking him up would not save lives,” Capelouto said. “Common sense tells you, if he’s behind bars, he can’t continue selling more pills.”

Federal fentanyl prosecutions are becoming more common, but remain rare, and Capelouto possessed a mountain of evidence that parents don’t always have. He had access to his daughter’s Snapchat messages and the drug deal documented by home security cameras. Without all this evidence—and without federal intervention—he said, other families in California would have a very difficult time securing convictions, and dealers would get away scot-free. He wants Alexandra’s Law to change all of this.

To make his case, Capelouto zoomed in on what he believed to be the intentionally deceptive nature of the drug deal. Yet the federal government’s own numbers show that dealers rarely misrepresent drugs to their customers on purpose. According to a 2021 report by the United States Sentencing Commission, less than 5 percent of 886 federally convicted fentanyl offenders intentionally misrepresented the substance during the transaction. The commission deemed this sort of deception “particularly aggravating conduct” that results in an even stiffer penalty. In

McDowell's case, the federal prosecutor did not insist on the most severe punishment possible. In fact, McDowell was able to plead to a lesser charge of "possession with intent to distribute fentanyl." He received a sentence of nine years.

In a press conference in Riverside, California, after the sentencing, Capelouto made it clear he wanted more. "I'm disappointed that Judge Jesus Bernal believed the defendant was not fully aware of the dangers of what he was selling," Capelouto said at the press conference, standing next to Riverside County's district attorney and a DEA agent. But there could be an additional reason for the lighter sentence: A condition of McDowell's probation is that, upon release, he enters addiction treatment and undergoes counseling and drug testing, the implication being that McDowell was also a user of the pills he was selling. Still, in Capelouto's mind, addiction should not be considered a mitigating factor. "Whether he had a drug habit himself or not should not dismiss, you know, his illegal conduct of being a drug dealer," he said. (An attorney who represented McDowell declined to comment on the record for this story, and an attempt to reach McDowell directly in federal prison was unsuccessful.)

Some drug policy researchers do support what Capelouto wants. Writing in *Scientific American*, two veterans of drug policy made the case for targeting "sellers who deliberately sell fentanyl to inexperienced users" over the internet, because these sellers are more likely to cause fatal overdoses. But the drug trade in America is a vastly complicated illegal market, and young people buying pills online make up only a small part of it. A new RAND report analyzing America's "opioid ecosystem" concluded that "drug-induced homicide laws make little sense, especially in the era of synthetic opioids." The reason why, the authors write, goes back to the intent of sellers and consumers. Due to illicit fentanyl contaminating the broader drug supply, the authors suggest, both sellers and consumers are often unaware of what's really in their drugs. In other words, drug-related deaths could be caused by ignorance rather than malice.

That ignorance is by design. Illegal drugs are inherently risky; they do not tend to be sold alongside a list of ingredients. The truth, according to multiple drug policy experts, is that almost a decade into this horrifying wave of fentanyl deaths, very little is known about dealers and what they know or don't know.

What we do know is that decades of research show that aggressive drug enforcement and lengthy prison sentences do not meaningfully reduce drug use or drug overdoses at all. The theory of deterrence has simply not held up against the economic or social realities that compel people to use or deal drugs. Other research shows that most drug arrests are for minute quantities, oftentimes less than a gram, which cannot possibly make a dent in availability or price. And since fentanyl is synthetic, large shipments that get seized can be quickly reproduced and replaced in the market. The days of "droughts" are largely over. Perhaps most damning to the case for aggressive drug enforcement, especially at the street level, is a new line of research suggesting that local drug seizures are actually associated with more overdose events, not fewer. Traditional policing and drug enforcement look increasingly futile in the fentanyl era.

Capelouto has heard most (if not all) of this before. He is undeterred. He sticks to his own experience, and to his belief that drug dealers are greedy, deceptive, and that they should be punished—whether it solves the fentanyl crisis or not. In the case of his own daughter, he ultimately did succeed in achieving at least part of his vision of justice. Even if it wasn't the 20-year penalty he hoped for, he said he was still "grateful" for the outcome: The young man who sold the fake pills will spend nine years in federal prison for it.

In federal court, Capelouto spoke directly to McDowell. He held a blue urn that contained Alexandra's ashes, and he said, "If there is anything I would wish for today, it would be to hear Alex's voice.... I just want to hear her voice." Capelouto is fueled by his own agony. "The grief is daily," he said. "It's never-ending." In this fight, his pain has found a purpose. "I have never sought any professional counseling or therapy," he told me. "This is the best way to deal with it. And, ultimately, hopefully, save others."

T**HE SYMPATHETIC PARENT**—white and suburban—has long played an influential role in shaping America's drug policy. In his forthcoming book, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs*, University of Michigan historian Matthew Lassiter refers to this movement as "Parent Power." In California in the 1950s, it was suburban parents who advocated for the kinds of mandatory minimums that would later be popularized in the Reagan-era war on drugs. He also found that those same parents hoped to shield their children from the punitive laws they supported. Lassiter even coined a name for the white youth victims of America's drug war: "impossible criminals," he calls them. Considered to be victims of "the urban pusher, foreign trafficker, and predatory ghetto addict" imagined as "'wolf packs' and 'rat packs' invading white communities to peddle drugs," Lassiter writes, America's youth were to be protected from the hordes, and if they succumbed to drug use, they were afforded the option of treatment instead of punishment. Throughout history, Lassiter argues, this agenda was pursued by both liberal and conservative politicians.

To understand the evolution of parent activism, Lassiter said that he has his students read a 2015 *New York Times* article with the headline, "IN HEROIN CRISIS, WHITE FAMILIES SEEK GENTLER WAR ON DRUGS." These families, the paper reported, were "part of a growing backlash against the harsh tactics of traditional drug enforcement." The grieving parents lobbied statehouses, held rallies, and started nonprofits, using their credibility to advocate for policies rooted in health care rather than jails and prisons. These parents were portrayed as well-to-do and well-organized. "Punishment is out and compassion is in," the *Times* wrote of these parents, while also noting the stark lack of empathy when drugs, not long ago, devastated Black communities, and the response was draconian drug enforcement and incarceration.

In a political twist, parents like the Capeloutos have formed a frontlash to the backlash against drug enforcement that began when heroin shattered suburban families. Now, compassion is out, and justice and retribution are in—at least among a newer cohort of families who are suffering another wave of unspeakable tragedy in the age of fentanyl. To help them pursue their goal of justice, and to change laws, families like the Capeloutos have built relationships with traditionally conservative institutions, from local prosecutors and sheriffs to federal law enforcement. But parents battling over drug policy today are not consciously modeling themselves after suburban parents of the 1950s.

Instead, they may be looking back to the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan became president and a new conservative mood took hold. An article in Kaiser Health News referred to the Capeloutos as being part of a new "MADD movement," alluding to the extraordinary success of Reagan-era parents who fought for tougher drunk-driving laws under the mantle of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Candace Lightner, who goes by Candy, started MADD in 1980 after her daughter, Cari, was struck and killed by a drunk driver. Lightner grew furious at laws she deemed to be far too lenient. Still active in politics to this day, Lightner wrote a letter backing Alexandra's Law. "She supported our bill 110 percent," Capelouto said.

Of course, one key difference between drunk driving and the current fentanyl crisis, critics of harsher laws say, is the potential for those who get involved with fentanyl to do so unwittingly—something virtually no drunk driver could ever credibly claim. But the Capeloutos aren't the only ones looking to MADD for inspiration in the fentanyl era.

From the push to label fentanyl a WMD to calling for war against drug cartels, the brash nationalist wing of the Republican Party has taken up the demands of grieving parents.

Jacqui Berlinn lives an hour outside of San Francisco in a town called Livermore, and she borrowed MADD's acronym when she formed a group called Mothers Against Drug Deaths. She then changed it to Mothers Against Drug Addiction and Deaths, or MADAAD, after the original group raised trademark concerns. Berlinn's activism stems from her experience with her 31-year-old son, Corey, who, in the account she frequently gives to news outlets, is currently addicted to fentanyl and living, homeless, on the street in San Francisco. Unlike Capelouto, who is focused on passing new laws, Berlinn appears to aim at provocation, and leans heavily on spectacle that generates attention in the press. Berlinn has protested against drug dealers in the Tenderloin, a neighborhood imagined on Twitter as a druggy hellscape where dealers and users brazenly break the law every day with impunity. In reality, the Tenderloin is a small slice of the city where social services, low-income housing, and addiction treatment are all concentrated, and where deep poverty is, increasingly, in close proximity to high-end luxury apartments for young, tech-savvy workers. Berlinn has also taken part in a protest at Venice Beach, another neighborhood where visible suffering and poverty generate friction with very wealthy Californians. She appeared on Tucker Carlson's erstwhile show on Fox News to criticize President Joe Biden, and she advocates for aggressive drug enforcement and against harm-reduction services, like overdose prevention sites, which she thinks are "enabling" addiction instead of treating it.

Berlinn's group has also placed cheeky billboards around California and Washington, D.C. The first went up in April 2022 and caused a local uproar. Floating above an aerial shot of the Golden Gate Bridge at dusk were the words: FAMOUS THE WORLD OVER FOR OUR BRAINS, BEAUTY AND, NOW, DIRT-CHEAP FENTANYL. The bottom text had the call to action: IT'S TIME TO CLOSE OPEN-AIR DRUG MARKETS, the markets where her son buys his drugs. The ad created a headache for Mayor London Breed, who had just traveled to Europe to lure tourists back to San Francisco. The moms soon placed another ad in Sacramento to get the attention of Governor Newsom. Off Interstate-80, the billboard featured the words WELCOME TO CAMP FENTANYL in the style of the National Park Service, with a makeshift tent encampment in the background. In January, the moms had a mobile billboard circling the streets of Washington, D.C. That ad addressed President Biden and his son Hunter, who has struggled with addiction. The ad featured a photo of Berlinn holding a poster of her son, Corey, next to the tagline, PLEASE HELP MY SON ESCAPE ADDICTION THE WAY YOU HELPED HUNTER.

The division between grieving parents mirrors broader societal cleavages over policing and criminal justice reform, but also, increasingly, foreign policy. The moms who started a Facebook group called Lost Voices of Fentanyl, which has about 27,000 members, have protested in front of the White House, using a megaphone to urge Biden to "wake up." In addition to joining calls for military-style action in Mexico, some of the moms have rallied in front of the Chinese Embassy, blaming the country for the production of fentanyl precursor chemicals.

The Lost Voices of Fentanyl group has helped spread the "poisoning" story far and wide, thanks, in part, to federal law enforcement. Virginia Krieger, one of the moms behind the group, boasts of having a "contract" with the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the agency has amplified their preferred language—that fentanyl deaths are not "overdoses" but "poisonings." "At the risk of jeopardizing our relationship with the DEA, I am not going to discuss the terms of our agreement or what type of agreement it is," Krieger told me. (A DEA employee clarified that there is no contract, but that the agency maintains a "memorandum of agreement" with various national partners.) Krieger then elaborated, telling me the group's relationship with the DEA concerns the "The Faces of Fentanyl," a memorial exhibit inside DEA headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. There, the agency curates a drug museum, featuring seized objects, like an illegal pill press. The Facebook group sends photos of people who died from fentanyl to the DEA, and about 2,000 photos like these are arranged in rows on thick granite walls. Each photo has the first name of the deceased, followed by their age at the time of their death, with the word "forever" next to it.

C**APELOUTO ISN'T SHY** about his personal politics. "I happen to be conservative," he told me. His ideology came through rather clearly in a 2022 profile that appeared in the right-wing outlet Breitbart News, in which he echoed prominent GOP talking points, often well before those talking points became standard Republican fare. Conservatives tend to describe drugs with a familiar hawkish tone, and speak of fentanyl as a national security threat that requires a military intervention.

In Breitbart, Capelouto referred to Mexican drug cartels as a "terrorist organization," a designation Biden and other Democrats reject. "Why has our own government never gone beyond our own borders to dismantle these terrorists?" he asked. On Fox News, he described fentanyl as a "weapon of mass destruction," another label that Biden's director of drug policy, Dr. Rahul Gupta, dismisses. The GOP deploys much of the same rhetoric. Trump Attorney General William Barr advocated for the terrorist label in a March op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal*, in which he wrote, "America can no longer tolerate narco-terrorist cartels." In November 2022, Representative Dan Crenshaw of Texas introduced a bill called the "Declaring War on the Cartels Act." Also last year, far-right Colorado Representative Lauren Boebert filed the "Fentanyl is a WMD Act" in the House. After Biden announced he's running for reelection in 2024, the Republican National Committee cut a dystopian "AI-generated" ad depicting what the world would look like if Biden won again. Over the sound of police sirens, a newscaster says, "Officials closed the city of San Francisco this morning, citing the escalating crime and fentanyl crisis."

It wasn't always this way. In 2016, polling found that opioids were one of the last remaining issues of bipartisan consensus in the United States, even if Trump was already scapegoating immigrants and falsely portraying asylum-seekers as drug smugglers. The crisis has deepened and worsened since then, diffusing grief and pain across the country, and the two parties now sound as far apart as ever when they invoke drugs. Democrats tend to emphasize the expansion of health care and treatment, while conservatives pitch something more dramatic and sensationalist—they promise they'll fight back, that they'll "secure" the southern border, that they'll bring justice to victims. From the push to label fentanyl a WMD to calling for war against drug cartels, the brash nationalist wing of the Republican Party has taken up the demands of grieving parents.

The Ternan family has decided to follow their own way forward. Ed and Mary Ternan, from Pasadena, lost their son Charlie to fentanyl in May 2020, three weeks before he was set to graduate from Santa Clara University with a degree in economics. Charlie also took a counterfeit pill he had bought over Snapchat. "We've zigged where others have zagged," Ed Ternan told me. He and his family are singularly focused on improving drug education and raising awareness about counterfeit pills and fentanyl's lethality. Their group, called Song for Charlie, is currently building a drug-education platform for the entire state of California. They chose to deliberately stay out of the political arena, because they fear politics could derail their message.

The Ternans do not want to get distracted in their effort to "reimagine the drug talk" between parents and children. "We have to do something different besides demonizing every substance that comes down the track," Ed said. They're not focused on "supply-side" tactics, like getting back at drug cartels or punishing dealers. They want to reduce demand, and educate young people about the dangers of fake pills. "Mary and I, and Charlie's older siblings, decided a long time ago that we definitely are not going down the 'We are gonna get justice' path," Ternan said. "That's not something that's healthy for us as a family. It doesn't help us with our grief."

O**N APRIL 25,** Matt Capelouto was back in the statehouse, the memory of his daughter powering his latest foray into legislative activism. At 8 in the morning, as he was on his way to another hearing about Alexandra's Law, he told me he was "not optimistic," but that he still had hope. "We'll see," he said. Hours later, as it became clear the measure would fail once again, for the fourth time, there was a commotion in the gallery. The committee vice chair called for civility and decorum, but the parents were too furious. One parent stood up and stormed out in a fit of rage. It was Matt Capelouto. "You're making every excuse for drug dealers!" he shouted.

By contrast, Aimee Dunkle said she felt relieved after the bill failed back in March, when she testified in Sacramento. "I played a tiny role in that, which meant a great deal to me," she said.

But she, too, was pained by the whole saga. "As I sat on the Senate floor waiting to testify, I was totally in no-man's-land," she told me. "I'm a grieving parent sitting in a room filled with grieving parents, and yet I don't belong." She could feel the rage in the room, and she wanted to get out. "From the moment my son died, I determined that I would go a different path with my grief," Dunkle told me. "I had to try and stay in the light for my family, for my surviving son."

Capelouto is cognizant of the sharp contrast—and he is wary of seeming angry and bitter. "In order to get the masses on our side, we still have to come across as rational, normal people," he said, "even though there is nothing normal about us anymore. It's a tough walk to walk."

Everything he's doing sounds tough. He stays up late at night, always working, thinking of maneuvers that could advance Alexandra's Law. "We're for sure going to bring it forward again next year," Capelouto said. But he's also, in his words, "disgusted" by the politics and politicking that has kept his daughter's namesake bill from becoming a law. "It's just very emotional and taxing."

Yet he won't let up. Or maybe he can't. After McDowell, the dealer who sold Alexandra drugs, was sentenced to nine years in prison, Capelouto didn't stop. If someday some version of Alexandra's Law manages to pass, would he stop there? Passing this bill has become something bigger for him, even bigger than a law that would affect some 40 million people living in the nation's biggest state. This has become his life's mission, an outlet for his pain. When he wakes up in the morning, he knows exactly what his task is, and he will pursue it, relentlessly, as he has for the past four years.

"There is nothing more debilitating than the grief of losing a child," Capelouto told me. "And on the opposite end of that, there's nothing more motivating."

Maybe he'll never stop. Because the one thing he truly wants, he knows he can't ever have. TNR

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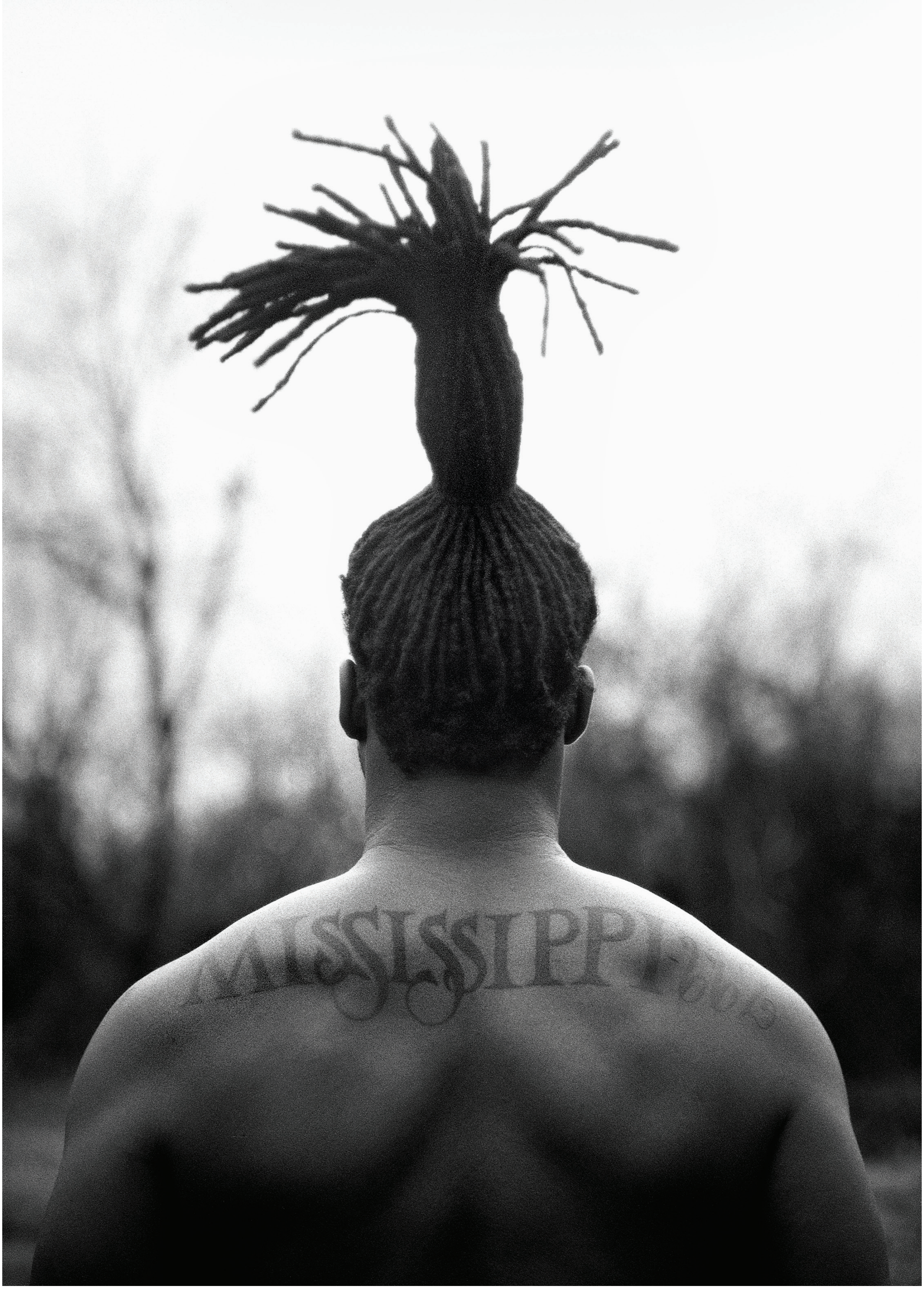
MISSISSIPPI 662

MISSISSIPPI 662', DUNCAN, MS 2012

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRANDON THIBODEAUX

Where the South Begins

A new history reveals a region constantly changing—and whose future is up for grabs.

By Scott W. Stern

MORE THAN A decade ago, on the first day of a college seminar titled “The American South,” Glenda Gilmore—one of the deans of Southern history—challenged my classmates and me to define the borders of the South. It was a surprisingly difficult task. Everyone agreed on, say, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina, but what about Oklahoma—was it Western or Southern? What about Kentucky, home state of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln? Perhaps Missouri, the setting of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn?* Undoubtedly northern Florida, but whither Miami? Why not New Mexico, which after all is south of Virginia? Does Delaware count? The exercise ended without any certainty, which surely was the point.

To the eminent (and eminently racist) Southern historian U.B. Phillips, the South was defined by its weather. Elsewhere, he labeled white supremacy the region’s “central theme.” To others, the South is simply the former Confederacy. To many, there’s an unspoken but firm association between Southernness and backwardness, or religion, or poverty. These assumptions position the South as a region apart, an “other” place, an American heart of darkness, a foil for the more enlightened North or the more entrepreneurial West.

It’s ironic, then, that the South has also become a stand-in for American authenticity. “The most violent and inequitable region of the country produced a disproportionate amount of the modernist literature, adventurous self-taught art, and genres of music and popular styles of religion, which entered into and then transformed the artistic sensibilities and cultural soundtracks of the twentieth century,” writes Paul Harvey in a penetrating essay in *A New History of the American South*. Consider the iconic American musical forms, the blues, jazz, country, gospel, soul—all have Southern origins. What would American religion look like without Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, the broader evangelical movement? Is modern American literature even imaginable without William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, or Thomas Wolfe?

Edited by the acclaimed University of North Carolina historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage, the 15 essays in *A New History* recount the origins, histories, and influences of the South. The specter of “Southern distinctiveness”—the idea that the region is uniquely, characteristically violent or dysfunctional—hangs over the collection, but it “is not an organizing conceit in this volume,” Brundage writes. Instead, he and his contributors have attempted something rarer: an entirely new narrative of the American South. Again and again, its essays emphasize that the South has not been static, “steeped in timeless traditions,” but rather has been “punctuated again and again by wrenching transformations.”

A dynamic South. The idea is counterintuitive precisely because of the prevalence of magnolia-shrouded imagery, because of accounts that position the South as the consistent spoiler, emphasis on the consistent. But the South that emerges from *A New History* is fresh and exciting in its unfamiliarity. It is a region of unstable boundaries, demographics, and politics, a site of shifting powers and protean culture. The South hasn’t always been a place of cruelly concentrated wealth, of rigid racial boundaries, of grinning, sweating, sloganeering, archconservative politicians. It has also been a launchpad of change, of radicalism, of resistance—and its future is yet unwritten.

IN THE BEGINNING, there were monsters. To stroll through the Ice Age South would be to encounter many familiar plants—from maples and hickories to, yes, magnolia and dogwood—but also giant land tortoises, giant moose, giant beavers, dire wolves, American lions, and (in Florida) giant armadillos. The coastlines were well over 100 miles beyond where they are today, and only with the warming of the globe did the glaciers retreat, the rivers stabilize, and the Southern forests assume a now-familiar ecology. Most of the great American megafauna died off.

Humans occupied what is now the South for many thousands of years—most Southern Native American origin stories involve west-to-east migrations, a narrative supported by the archaeological record—but the end of the Ice Age about 11,000 years ago spurred the development of larger communities, the centralization of political power, increased trade, increased warfare, and eventually the domestication of plants and a transition to agricultural societies. Thus did climatic change set in motion the first of the South’s series of metamorphoses.

In *A New History*’s first essay, the historical anthropologist Robbie Ethridge covers these millennia of transformations swiftly yet with aplomb and respect. Eventually, the colonizers arrived. First came the Spanish, who encountered a dense web of chiefdoms and a century of resistance. Even as other imperial powers—the English, the French—set up small outposts, Native Americans continued to constitute the majority of the region’s population until well into the eighteenth century.

Over time, the English—with Native allies and Native slaves and then, increasingly, African slaves—became more powerful, spreading from Virginia to

Maryland to Carolina (not yet bifurcated), but social relations remained malleable. Some seventeenth-century Africans lived freely in the South; some even owned slaves themselves; and others worked for a time as indentured servants, a status they shared with legions of poor and striving whites. In the mid–seventeenth century, fearful that the growing class of temporary and former servants might displace them, white property owners passed laws that phased out indentures for white people and established a system of chattel slavery (permanent and heritable) for Black people. This effectively divided the working class along racial lines, exactly as the tobacco planters and colonial overlords intended. Indeed, many historians have shown how this transformation created the modern idea of race itself. The English colonies transformed, Jon F. Sensbach writes in his essay, “from a society with slaves to a slave society.”

Slavery grew to such an extent that some areas (famously South Carolina) became majority Black in the eighteenth century, and plantations began farming rice, drawing on captured Africans’ knowledge of the crop. Slave revolts became common features of life in the South, and many Black people escaped and found refuge in the declining Spanish colony of Florida or within Native communities.

“It may be no exaggeration to say that in the southern colonies, enslaved Africans made the first bids for independence, helping to trigger the Revolution,” writes Michael A. McDonnell in his essay. Escape attempts and rumors of impending armed revolt greatly heightened tensions within the Southern colonies, with many colonists believing that “the British would liberate slaves.” When revolution eventually broke out in the mid-1770s, many in the South were either loyal to the British or too focused on the “threat of insurrection by enslaved Africans” to join the war effort. The Continental Congress made George Washington of Virginia the head of its army in an attempt to gin up Southern support for the war, but thousands of “loyalists” across the region nonetheless waged guerrilla warfare against the revolutionaries. In the end, the British were simply too disorganized to exploit their advantages (including the legions of Black people fleeing to their lines), but victory in the war for colonial independence was “a close-run thing,” McDonnell concludes.

The Revolutionary War had been monstrously costly, a destructive cataclysm, and an economic downturn and widespread anger followed in its wake. This spurred a rise in Southern “localism”—a desire for greater control over local affairs—yet “the South” was not yet perceived as (nor did its residents perceive themselves as belonging to) a distinctive region. It was, among other factors, fights over slavery that hardened the categories of “the North” and “the South.” The Southern states were home to an agricultural political economy deeply dependent on slavery, and even as abolition took hold in Haiti, Spanish-controlled Latin America, and (parts of) the British Empire, powerful Southerners united in support of the system that enabled the mass cultivation of rice, tobacco, and cotton. Dissenters (of many races) fled north or west; ideas of whiteness solidified in the aftermath of Indian expulsion and the expansion of suffrage to poorer white men; slave-state politicians began to identify as “Southerners”; and, as Martha S. Jones writes in her essay, Northern abolitionists began speaking of slavery as “a distinctly southern problem.”

MISSISSIPPI RIVER, VICKSBURG, MS 2011

A New History of the American South
edited by
W. Fitzhugh Brundage
University of
North Carolina Press,
616 pp., $45.00

Of course, the South remained a site of “porous” boundaries, as Kate Masur emphasizes in her chapter. It was home to a diverse array of immigrants, defiant Native communities, and vibrant (and surprisingly mobile) slave subcultures. Rail and steam transport, as well as the global commodities trade, connected the South to the world at large, and the region’s southern border shifted as settlers in Texas warred with Mexico over land. The diversity of crops, climates, and types of social organization meant that each area had its own distinctive political orientation, a fact that frustrated those, like Senator John C. Calhoun of

South Carolina, who pushed for a collective Southern separatism.

Eventually, those in power—"planter-politicians," to borrow a term from Gregory P. Downs's essay—grew so fearful of abolition that they launched a war. "By drawing a sharp political line around the Confederate states," Downs continues, "the war made real what had only been metaphorical." From a distance of a century and a half, it's easy to forget that the South could have won the war. "There was in fact nothing foreordained about the survival of the American nation," Masur writes, noting the proliferation of new nations and revolutionary movements throughout the nineteenth century. Only through a combination of enhanced industrial capacity, the neutrality of European powers, and Black rebellion so widespread that W.E.B. Du Bois would label it a "General Strike" did the North clinch victory and keep the South as merely the southerly region of a larger nation.

"But the Confederate dream did not die quite yet," Downs notes with foreboding. "The nationalism created during the war would outlive the nation that failed."

IN THE YEARS following the Civil War, a new South seemed possible. Thousands of Black men won elections to state legislatures, Congress, and local offices such as magistrate, deputy sheriff, and coroner. Public education expanded rapidly, reaching many poorer whites and Black people for the first time, and a spate of colleges and technical schools opened for former slaves. In some places, poor farmers (white and Black) secured autonomy and even land itself. Reconstruction, as this period is known, could have been a second—and far more revolutionary—American Revolution.

Instead, white people across the South struck back with a vengeance. "Many could accept the death of the Confederacy," Downs writes, "but not of their local power." Vigilante groups—of which the most famous is the Ku Klux Klan—arose, and in several states former Confederates effectively staged violent coups to retake power from legitimate Reconstruction governments. By the 1880s, nearly half of former slave-owning planter families had lost their lands, and a postwar financial downturn and a slide in cotton prices had helped turn the South into "a symbol of economic and social backwardness." But the remaining former slaveholders had united with ascendant manufacturing and financial elites to retake power.

A dynamic South. The idea is counterintuitive because of the prevalence of magnolia-shrouded imagery, and accounts that position the South as the consistent spoiler, emphasis on the consistent.

They became a new kind of aristocracy—the "Bourbons," in the parlance of the time—and consolidated their wealth and control by reviving many features of the slave system in all but name. The Bourbons withdrew access to the polls by systematically disenfranchising Black voters; they yoked poor families (Black and white) to large plantations by paying them only in store credit or a "share" of the crops that they farmed; they reestablished large-scale involuntary labor by "leasing" convicts (many hastily convicted of vaguely defined crimes such as vagrancy). By 1880, the region was producing 60 percent more cotton than it had in the 1850s.

The rich held "three aces," in the words Scott Reynolds Nelson: "access to credit, title to land, and growing political power." They also arrogated to themselves the power of the executioner, and tactics such as lynching and race riots (i.e., mass murder campaigns) suppressed resistance to newly enacted laws that instantiated segregation in schools, businesses, residences, and trains and streetcars. Black people continued to carve out pockets of prosperity even in a segregated society, establishing their own schools, businesses, and a handful of utopian, separatist towns. Yet separate was never equal, and—as Blair L.M. Kelley emphasizes in her essay—things were even less equal and more violent in rural places across the South.

In the early twentieth century, poverty, illiteracy, and all manner of illnesses plagued the rural South. Reformers of all races—motivated by embarrassment, compassion, greed, or some flavor of Christianity—sought to sand off the region's roughest edges. Some decried planter venality only to scapegoat Jews and Roman Catholics; some pushed prison reform and women's rights only to promote virulent racism; some Black reformers revealed disturbingly conservative tendencies even as they fought against the indignities of Jim Crow. "Southern white reformers managed to ameliorate the most extreme disparities in the region," concludes Natalie J. Ring, "but only to the degree that their efforts delayed an eventual reckoning over the extent and nature of inequality in the South." Eventually, the flood of federal cash that came available during the New Deal improved everyday life considerably across the South, even as its transformative potential, too, was blunted at the insistence of a rising class of Southern "demagogue" politicians (such as James K. "White Chief" Vardaman and Jeff "Wild Ass of the Ozarks" Davis).

Marginalized Southerners of all stripes had never stopped fighting against oppression, but only in the mid–twentieth century did a broad-based civil rights movement become possible. Soldiers returned home and started organizing; students sat in at segregated lunch counters; preachers preached; writers wrote; many Black people voted with their feet and left the South in the Great Migration; many other Black people stayed, and some started hoarding guns, forming armed resistance groups such as the Deacons for Defense, preparing to meet violence with violence. Kari Frederickson's essay on the South and the state in the twentieth century covers these

LAKE MARTIN, LA, 2021

developments fluently but, by necessity, very quickly.

Kenneth R. Janken, in the collection's final contribution, looks more squarely at the postwar freedom struggle, noting its myriad successes, but also how its most radical dreams—of economic rights, wealth redistribution, an end to U.S. wars of aggression—were extinguished as moderates and liberals repeatedly branded agitators as communists or degenerates and expelled them from public life. This pattern continued for decades, perhaps peaking (though by no means ending) in the 1986 congressional race in Georgia, when John Lewis (who had abandoned his firebrand origins and embraced "'practical,' moderate change," in Janken's words) smeared his left-wing opponent, Julian Bond, by accusing him of using cocaine and taunting him to take a drug test.

The solidly Democratic South started turning Republican as the Democrats became more associated with civil rights, as charismatic conservative politicians—Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Donald Trump—effectively consolidated support. Protestant evangelicalism, meanwhile, spread rapidly across the land, its tribunes preaching adherence to patriarchal gender norms, promoting the pursuit of prosperity, and increasingly urging their flocks to vote Republican. The region's farm population plummeted as Southern states urbanized and suburbanized and as the remaining farmers became more dependent on transient labor. Certain segments of the South (Houston, Austin, Atlanta, perhaps even Raleigh/Durham) became part of the much-ballyhooed "Sun Belt," while other parts (central Florida, northern Alabama, northeastern Virginia, Dallas-Fort Worth) rose with the "Gun Belt," as military contractors—and the military itself—exploited the region's cheap land, low wages, and nonunionized workforce.

Looking back, the legacy of the battles for civil rights "appeared paradoxical," notes Paul Harvey. While de jure segregation had ended, practically speaking, white and Black people in the South—especially in rural areas—"remained quite separate, and the extent of Black poverty rivaled that of the worst areas of the country." And though the South was "born global," adds Peter A. Coclanis, recent waves of migrants from Asia and Latin America have altered its demographics, provided an influx of economic dynamism even as industrial jobs have disappeared, and—in a broader sense—challenged the many caricatures of the South that *A New History* excels at puncturing.

A NEW HISTORY is a blockbuster collection that exceeds 600 pages, but it is not an encyclopedia, so it's natural that some holes remain. The essays of *A New History* have little to say about queer Southerners, the place and role of prisons in the South, the border, Tejanos, Miami and the "Nuevo South," and Walmart. Essays certainly address Southern radicalism, but the name Huey Long never appears, and the significance of Southern socialists and union organizers is, at times, undercounted. The South is the birthplace of the modern environmental justice movement, but this goes unmentioned.

No one volume can be truly definitive. What is so exciting about *A New History* is its refusal to accept the "definitive" shibboleths of the past, its insistence on integrating new findings and new voices into the story of a region almost invariably slapped with the labels of "timeless" or "unchanging."

Some of the most captivating essays in the book stray from conventional chronologies and instead zoom in on specific people and places, telling their stories as stories of the South. In "The Bourbon South," for instance, Scott Reynolds Nelson explores the postbellum South through the eyes of two observers, both named Henry Grady. The first was a prominent newspaper editor and political leader who "hoped to cobble together a common region and assemble a new elite to rule it." The second was an obscure laborer who literally helped link the South together by working on interstate railways, and who left behind a collection of letters, scrawled almost illegibly in purple crayon, which cast doubt on the "New South" that his wealthier doppelgänger was building. He found Louisiana to be bewildering, and the Mississippi Valley ugly and inhospitable; both were described as another "country." His letters reveal how, even three decades after the Civil War, "there was no common South."

In an otherwise glowing review of *A New History*, Kirkus remarked that the collection "briefly stumbles" when contributors focus "on select individuals rather than the South as a whole." I disagree. It is impossible to cover "the South as a whole"—not only because of the multitudes contained within any place, but also because the region is itself a construct, a convenient fiction.

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Love in a Cold Climate

Jenny Erpenbeck's intimate study of secrecy and betrayal in East Germany

By Rumaan Alam

IT'S A RAINY day in 1986 in East Germany. A young woman spies a man on a bus. They strike up a conversation. "That was all. Everything was underway, there was no other possibility." This encounter gives Jenny Erpenbeck the title for her fifth novel:

> Kairos, the god of fortunate moments, is supposed to have a lock of hair on his forehead, which is the only way of grasping hold of him. Because once the god has slipped past on his winged feet, the back of his head is sleek and hairless, nowhere to grab hold of. Was it a fortunate moment, then, when she, just nineteen, first met Hans?

She is Katharina, an adult by the technical definition we use these days; Hans is 53, with a teenage son of his own. Over coffee, he learns that Katharina is an apprentice typesetter, she that Hans is a novelist. "She had only just been born when his first book appeared. He took his first steps under Hitler." They repair to Hans's apartment, his wife and child conveniently absent. Hans pours wine. He plays records: Schubert, Bach, Mozart's *Requiem*. "The way her bare

ILLUSTRATION BY EVA VÁZQUEZ

> Maybe history is as unknowable as what goes on between two other people: ecstasy and passion, insult and pain, the singular complicated thing we sum up as love.

shoulder feels in his cupping hand during the prayer, the one curve under the other, is something he won't forget as long as he lives. *To thee comes all flesh*, yes, that's how it is, he thinks, and then he stops thinking." Sex as profound as a sacrament is rather like a meet-cute on a bus—a convention of fiction that's maybe a little too rare in reality.

Hans is not only married, he also has another lover. Katharina takes this in stride: "If you had a thousand women, she says, all that matters is the time that *we* get to spend together." Sure, the lust of the middle-aged for the young is a tad unseemly ("The black velvet ribbon moves him, it makes her look like a schoolgirl"), but one night Hans lingers outside the café where they first got to know each other: "What was he expecting, to see them both sitting there, like a waxwork, while he was outside, looking in?" It sounds like love.

We think we know how this is going to go: the man at midlife who chucks it all for a young woman. Indeed, Katharina reads as but a girl, in thrall to her lover the way a toddler believes an adult might indeed have swiped the nose off her face: "How was it possible that Hans knew her better than she knew herself?"

We might assume a contemporary novel will upend the convention: give voice to the younger woman, or reveal romance as exploitation—abuse, even. Erpenbeck is up to something less predictable. *Kairos* opens with a brief prologue, in which an older Katharina inherits the late Hans's ephemera. She considers these and her own correspondence and mementos from the time "'flat product' for the most part, as the archivists like to say." These dusty pages were the dialogue between lovers: "the papers in his boxes and those in her suitcase were speaking to each other. Now they're both speaking to time." This is a book about a decisive moment in these small lives, but it's also a novel about a moment in history.

THIS STORY CAN fairly be called Katharina's coming of age. We see her first trip to the West, when she is granted permission to visit relatives in Cologne. That she imagines the place might smell of the care packages that family send her—"of detergent, gummi bears, and coffee"—reminds us just how young she is. And naïve, her education as a Young Pioneer having failed to prepare her for the sight of people sleeping on the streets. How do they survive the winter? Her uncle reassures her: "they lie on hot-air vents, and they're toasty warm."

One of the symptoms of childhood's end is that you comprehend your elders as human, connected to a reality that predates your existence. On this trip, her grandmother offhandedly tells Katharina of finding photographs of an unknown woman and child in her late husband's effects. One is labeled with the name of the Norwegian town where he spent the war. "Twenty years I was married to Karl, she says, we had two daughters together, and even so, I'd never say I knew him."

Maybe the past is uniquely present in Germany; maybe it's the lot of the German artist to reckon with this. Erpenbeck's 2008 novel, *Visitation*, traces the history of a lakeside home in the German countryside, as twentieth-century calamity falls on the various occupants of this bucolic retreat: the Jewish family who must sell it as Hitler gains power; the Russian soldiers who settle in during the war; the man who lives there under the socialist state. In 2015's *Go, Went, Gone*, chance encounter binds the lives of a retired German professor and a group of African refugees; the abstract issue of displacement is transformed into something humane and deeply affecting.

Erpenbeck is adept at exploring big subjects via the intimate relationships between people. In *Kairos*, Katharina peruses a volume on Picasso in Hans's apartment. "Anyone with sense and ethics was on the Left in those days," the man tells his young lover. He points out that the Germans rehearsed for World War II during the Spanish Civil War. To this, Katharina has no reply; it makes her think of her grandfather.

Later, on a beach holiday, Hans recalls his childhood near Stutthof, the concentration camp. His father did not work there but "taught the Poles to appreciate German values." Katharina wonders whether he was in the Hitler Youth. "Violent exercise wasn't my thing, says Hans. But I liked being part of the select."

There's some telling foreshadowing when the lovers stand before the Pergamon Altar. "See how close they are, says Hans, the intimacy of battle, and how well-matched they are. See how alike are love and hate." We assume age difference means power discrepancy, but in fact Hans and Katharina are well-matched. What is to come for these two bolsters Hans's assertion that love and hate are closely related—and I'm not just talking about their sexual explorations, the man tying the girl to the bed, then: "Once, twice, three times, he strikes her, each time Katharina flinches. Red welts appear straightaway on her skin. Then he puts his belt down, and applies his mouth to the red welts, which are already swollen."

Kairos does not condemn Hans for this violence; it does not posit Katharina's submission to her lover as abuse. It's a clear-eyed book, morally neutral and the more interesting for it. Hans recalls snooping on another patient during a childhood visit to the dentist: "I heard the drill and listened to her screams. It was the first time in my life that I can remember being aroused." Serious adults accept that sex is a complicated business. It's refreshing for a writer to acknowledge this (if somehow unsurprising from a European writer). The act of sexualized violence clarifies something: "Only now, thinks Katharina, do I truly know him. Did he give himself up to her, or she to him? Or, if love is serious, are they indistinguishable?"

This is a hard question to answer, and one I was not especially engaged by. "When

Erpenbeck wins the Nobel Prize in a few years," James Wood wrote of her book *Go, Went, Gone* in 2017, "I suspect that this novel will be cited." This prediction was lodged in my mind as I read. I could not believe a writer of this stature would bother with youthful romance, and I was determined to ferret out her true subject. Sure enough, Katharina and Hans's long dialogue becomes two people speaking to time itself. It's at once a novel about the collision between two people and one about the collision of two German lives: a onetime Hitler Youth and a girl born into a divided city.

Hans eventually loses Katharina, less to another lover (though she does take those, men and women alike) than to adulthood. He is reminded of an earlier betrayal: "When he was in his early twenties, he was deeply affected by the news of Stalin's death. Then even more affected, three years later, by the truth about Stalin."

Later in the novel, Hans's mind turns to the brutality of occupation:

> If in the course of a five-day plan, 200,000 Berliners were removed by 50,000, these 50,000 proletarians would be fused into a collective by the shock of having killed. A thought game of Brecht's at the time of the emergency decrees, when, shortly before Hitler, starving was considered every citizen's duty. The abolition of a pitiless world through pitilessness.

A postcoital reflection unlike most, an intimate moment stitched to a historical one. Elsewhere, Hans pens a letter to Katharina about a planned assignation—"Hans writes, once each, the words 'punishment,' 'rape,' and 'force.'" These aren't the filthy promises of one lover to another. This is the language of analysis, a historian documenting the tools of domination.

IN *NOT A NOVEL*, an omnibus of the author's lectures and essays, Erpenbeck reflects on her East German upbringing, which plainly informs much of *Kairos*, and the eventual dissolution of the nation in which she was born. Kairos the god has given us the concept of a kairos: an opportune moment. For Erpenbeck, this is the evening of November 9, 1989, when the East German government declared its borders open. What this meant for the state was opaque; were the guards stationed at the Berlin Wall meant to allow citizens passage to the West? They did.

> There was suddenly a lot of talk of *freedom*, but I couldn't make much of this word *freedom*, which floated freely in all sorts of sentences.... *Freedom* wasn't given freely, it came at a price, and the price was my entire life up to that point. The price was that everything that had been called the present until then was now called the past.

Reading *Kairos*, I was struck by how little I knew of the strange compromise that led to the partition of Berlin in the first place. I was 12 when that arrangement fell apart, and I think I remember watching jubilant Germans on the television news. I now have a son about the age I was when the wall came down. As I was reading *Kairos*, his eighth-grade class was tackling *Animal Farm*. I wondered what an American boy born when Obama was in the White House could possibly make of Orwell's allegory. Then felt chastened that an American adult was as stymied as I was by Erpenbeck's novel.

I read *Go, Went, Gone* in 2018, and found some resonance between the story of African refugees in Western Europe and the crisis of Central and South Americans at America's southern border. That novel has a pathos that *Kairos* does not. Richard, the protagonist, becomes enmeshed in the lives of a group of African migrants. One tells him that the sum he needs to secure his family's future in Ghana is quite modest. When Richard thinks about various things he has considered buying—a surfboard, a robot vacuum cleaner—it's unbearable for him, morally, as well as for us, as readers. Erpenbeck's newer book, even with its heated romance, is cooler, more analytical.

My inability to comprehend how it might have felt to be an East German in 1989—exchanging one's entire life for something called freedom—felt first like a personal intellectual failing. Then it felt like the author's very point. Perhaps I can no more imagine being a 53-year-old man besotted with a 19-year-old girl. Maybe history is as fundamentally unknowable as what goes on between two other people: ecstasy and passion, insult and pain, the singular complicated thing we sum up as love. After all, am I not as poorly equipped as Katharina the Young Pioneer was, taught that this decisive moment in history was "our" long-awaited triumph in the Cold War?

Kairos
by Jenny Erpenbeck
New Directions,
336 pp., $25.95

We learn, in the novel's final pages, that Hans was an "informal collaborator" to the state— "deployed to work on appropriate female subjects." It's a shocking revelation but somehow as distant as Katharina's grandmother acknowledging that her husband likely fathered a child in Norway during the war. Just as Hans bound Katharina to a bed, the government "walled up the people to win the people." *Kairos* is a love story: that of "a heated struggle—first under conditions of illegality and underground struggle, and then beneath a central government—for the heart of its own people. The institution, not entirely by chance, calls itself an *organ*."

Adult Katharina recalls Hans quoting Lenin:

> *In order to truly know a subject, it is necessary to comprehend and study all of its aspects, all its relationships and instrumentalities.*
> Is that not just what the *organ* tried to do?
> And sitting here, is she not doing the same thing?

Katharina suggests—with some umbrage—that "only souls from the Eastern part of Germany" are being brought to account for the past. She feels that many Germans who lived through the Nazi period escaped this particular reckoning.

I don't know what a national process of political reconciliation might look like, in Germany or in the United States, where there's plenty of atonement to be done. Erpenbeck, however, might already be working in pursuit of that. "Is it the case here," the author wonders, "that day after day, silently, people come to an understanding of their own lives by way of the understandings of others?" To me, that sounds like the project of fiction itself.

Rumaan Alam *is a contributing editor at* The New Republic. *His latest novel is* Leave the World Behind.

ILLUSTRATION BY ISABEL SELIGER

Stranger Things

Lorrie Moore dispenses with realism.

By Maggie Doherty

IN "WINGS," a story from Lorrie Moore's 2014 collection, *Bark*, KC, a failed musician, muses on what it might be like to die. She's been spending time—arguably too much time—with her elderly neighbor Milt, and she has mortality on the brain.

> KC herself imagined dying would be full of rue: like flipping through the pages of a clearance catalog, seeing the drastic markdowns on stuff you'd paid full price for and not gotten that much use from, when all was said and done. Though all was never said and done. That was the other part about death.

The passage is trademark Moore, blending the tragic and the comic, the serious and the pointless. Its tone is wry, almost weary, as if KC is older than her 38 years. There's an elaborate simile that expands over the course of a sentence. There's a cliché ("when all was said and done"), followed quickly by a riff on the cliché ("all was never said and done"). And there's a dark turn near the end of the passage, the realization that the dying, no matter how old they are, always leave this world too soon.

Untimely deaths have been a consistent theme in Moore's fiction. In her first collection, *Self-Help* (1985), Moore, then in her twenties, related the inner thoughts of a young mother whose terminal cancer has spread "like a clumsy uninvited guest." In her follow-up collection, *Like Life* (1990), a 35-year-old woman named Mamie spends her days looking for a place to live and her nights dreaming about places where it's acceptable to die. Two of Moore's strongest stories, both from *Birds of America* (1998), are about the imminent deaths, or the narrowly avoided deaths, of children. "Dance in America" describes a spirited fourth-grader with cystic fibrosis, while "People Like That Are the Only People Here" takes place in a pediatric oncology ward. These last two stories represent Moore at her best: unflinching, insouciant, morbidly funny. She manages to do with her prose what the narrator of "Dance" claims to do with her body: to show "life flipping death the bird."

It's no surprise, then, that her most recent work of fiction, *I Am Homeless if This Is Not My Home*, describes two characters dying before their time. There's Max, a middle-aged father with late-stage cancer, and Lily, a charismatic, mentally ill woman who ultimately takes her own life.

PHOTO REFERENCE: GARY LEONARD/GETTY

I Am Homeless if This Is Not My Home
by Lorrie Moore
Knopf,
208 pp., $27.00

They are linked through Finn, a cranky schoolteacher, who is Max's younger brother and Lily's ex-boyfriend. Over the course of the novel, Finn toggles between these two dying, then dead, intimates. At its end, he's left alone to grapple with loss.

And yet the novel is tonally and stylistically quite different from the works that have preceded it. *I Am Homeless* doesn't have the antic energy of Moore's early novels, nor the combination of dismay and exuberance that we find in many of her short stories. The pacing is slow; the tone is muted, questioning, almost sincere. Moore has spent much of her career chronicling the familiar conflicts and indignities of contemporary middle-class life in the United States, but in this novel, she dispenses with many of realism's conventions. Strange events occur: People have premonitions; the distant past bleeds into the present; a dead body returns to life.

Moore doesn't seem quite at home in this mode. Encounters with the spiritual world are awkward rather than unnerving; plots intersect without clear meaning or effect. One can't help but miss the snappy dialogue and the sharp observations that characterize so much of Moore's fiction. This latest work, by contrast, is jarring, repetitive, at times a little boring. But then—who can say?—perhaps death is as well.

MOORE HAS DABBLED in the fantastic before. Her first novel, *Anagrams* (1986), shifted between a central plot and the imaginings of Moore's characters. The protagonist, Benna, has an imaginary six-year-old daughter, and much of the novel is given over to describing their interactions in great and moving detail. With its multiple frames and shifting points of view, the novel is less magically realist than it is postmodern. More recently, with "The Juniper Tree," from *Bark*, Moore attempted something like a ghost story: The narrator of the story visits the house of a just-deceased friend, only to find the woman herself in the living room, waiting for her friends to bid her farewell.

But Moore has never before so thoroughly blended the historical and the contemporary, or the real world and the spiritual one, as she does in *I Am Homeless*. The novel begins with a subplot: A woman running a boardinghouse in the postbellum U.S. South describes, in a letter to her sister, her efforts to manage a handsome, lecherous boarder. Though the language of the letter is straight out of the nineteenth century (we read of "varmints," "nightjars," and a "desk cartonnier"), the writer's sensibility is strikingly modern, suggesting that Moore isn't after historical accuracy. We then switch to the contemporary moment and to the novel's central plot. It's the fall of 2016, and Finn, on leave from the private Midwestern high school where he teaches, has come to New York to see Max, now in hospice, through to the end of life.

The first third of the novel tracks Finn's efforts to perform the role of "death doula." We learn what it's like to sit beside the dying. Finn, aiming to distract, tries to get Max to chat about childhood memories and the Cubs' World Series prospects. Max—thin and hairless, his skin "buttery" and apricot-hued—snaps in and out of cogency. "His stare sometimes fixed itself pensively into the middle distance, as if he were looking into his own grave," Moore writes. Finn feels himself to be at once essential and useless. How can he communicate meaningfully with his brother at this moment? Can he—should he—convince Max to hang on just a little longer?

While wrestling with these questions, Finn gets a text message from Lily's friend Sigrid: "Come home," it reads. "Urgent matters." Still loyal to Lily, and unconcerned that she's been dating another man, Finn leaves "the bardo of the hospice to its trapped souls and the steel beds and alarmingly colored drinks" and begins the long drive west, thinking, with "an illogical sense of hope," that Max will wait to die until his return. It's not quite clear what we're supposed to make of Finn's decision: Is he admirably devoted to Lily? Or is he fearful and flighty, leaping at any excuse to leave a difficult vigil? Many hours and one car accident later, Finn makes it to Sigrid's house, where he learns that Lily, recently institutionalized, has managed to drown herself in the shower. She's already been buried, in a "green cemetery" where her body can degrade.

Much of what follows represents Finn's effort to prove his and Lily's enduring love, death and its permanence be damned. "You and Lily were never on the same page at the same time," Sigrid says, as part of an elaborate seduction scheme. Finn, for his part, believes that he and Lily "were water birds who'd mated for life—and yet often conducted their lives separately in another part of the meadow or the pond." He drives to Lily's grave, where he finds his ex resurrected:

> There was Lily, standing in the dead fleabane ... her shroud draped around her, a cocooning filthy gown. She seemed to have emerged from a mist that still swirled about her feet.... She smiled at him with a mouth full of dirt, her face still possessed of her particular radiant turbulence—yet watery, as if he were seeing not so much her face but its reflection in a pond. Her eyes were the dead bone buttons of a white dress shirt. Then suddenly color, their greenish gray, washed into them.

There's some lovely writing here—"the dead bone buttons of a white dress shirt" is especially nice—though it may be too lovely for what it describes. Lily is not a ghost but a dead body, temporarily revivified and subject to decay. (Later, Finn must carry her in and out of a truck stop; later still, he washes her gently, replacing her skin as it sloughs off.) It's Finn's love, we realize, that colors the narration, rendering the dead body beautiful again. The two embark on a madcap road trip south, to a forensic research facility—a "body farm"—in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Here is where the novel stagnates. Finn and Lily banter—about funeral songs, jokey epitaphs, Schrödinger's cat—but their dialogue lacks the crackle that so often exists between Moore's romantic couples. Again and again, Finn asks Lily why she wanted (wants?) to die; again and again, she rebuffs him, saying he can't understand. She's vague and evasive about the afterlife; rather than demystifying death, she makes it sound even more unknowable and strange. Moore describes Lily's dead body repeatedly: Her ribs are like "the slats of venetian blinds behind the translucent voile of her skin"; her body after a bath resembles "the rice wrap on a spring roll, the bean sprouts and chopped purple cabbage visible inside her." The images are

Death remains a mystery to the living, no matter how close they get to the dying or to the dead.

beautiful, but they pile up purposelessly, like so many items in a landfill.

Somewhere in or near Kentucky, Finn and Lily spend the night at an inn—a "decrepit manse" that turns out to be the boardinghouse from the novel's opening letter. (Other letters from this writer, Elizabeth, are interspersed throughout.) The woman at the front desk claims the house isn't haunted exactly; it just carries a lot of Civil War history. We later learn that Elizabeth killed the lecherous boarder in the bathtub—perhaps the same bathtub in which Finn bathes Lily—and that the sister she's been writing to is also dead, her ashes used as a deicing agent.

It's possible to track the parallels between these two, intersecting narrative timelines: There are two siblings in mourning or in proto-mourning, two seducers, two women whose dead bodies are or soon will be, in Elizabeth's words, "put to good use." But what does the Civil War have to do with Lily and Finn? Are the many mentions of Lincoln intended to remind us that, in the narrative present, a less noble figure will soon assume the presidency? Is Elizabeth's murderous action a kind of #MeToo move, made some 150 years in advance? The novel invites us to speculate about the resonances between the postbellum era and our own, but they're not easily identified. The plots tangle like matted hair.

Finn eventually drops Lily at the body farm, shocked that his beloved, given something like a second chance, still chooses to die. Lily insists that death is all around us and we would do well to accept it; Finn makes the case for staying attached to life and to those you love. He's angry at Lily: for wanting to die, and for dying now, when his brother is dying as well. "He could feel now that his brother was dying right then at that very moment, just as he uttered these words," Moore writes. "He could hear the last pounding of Max's heart on the hard door of time." It's another moment of synchronicity, two deaths happening simultaneously. Finn witnesses Lily's but not his brother's. Despite the promises he made to Max of fidelity and companionship, Finn has left his brother to die alone.

WHAT DO WE owe our siblings? It's not a commonly asked question—we're more likely to ask what a child owes a parent, or what one spouse owes another—but Moore has posed it in each of her four novels. In *Anagrams*, Benna wonders how affectionate she needs to be with her awkward, disheveled brother Louis. In *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* (1994), the protagonist Berie comes to regret the cruelty she showed her foster sister, LaRoue; the latter dies by suicide before Berie can fully make amends.

In *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), her messiest yet richest novel, Moore provides her most sustained exploration of the sibling bond. Tassie, an undergraduate at a prestigious Midwestern university wrapped up in her own problems, ignores advice-seeking emails from her younger brother, Robert. Without any guidance from his sister, Robert decides to enlist in the Army. He's shipped off to Afghanistan during the early phase of the so-called war on terrorism and dies almost immediately. At the funeral, Tassie climbs into Robert's coffin, pushing aside the body parts stuffed with Styrofoam and newsprint; she stays curled next to her brother, or what's left of him, until moments before the coffin is lowered into the ground. It's a haunting image of sibling love, and it's stayed with me for a long time.

Max's funeral, which owes something to Robert's in *Gate*, is equal parts unbearable and absurd. "The service seemed to bear no resemblance to the story of his brother's life," Finn reflects. "Scripture continued to be read nonsensically. There were more psalms set to music." When Finn finally has the chance to speak, he rambles about Max's essential goodness and "beautiful stoicism," about his own failures as a younger brother, and about how the "mind-meld of brothers had kept them connected," such that Finn knew the exact moment that Max left this Earth. Finn sees worried faces in the pews. "He knew then that he sounded insane to absolutely everyone."

When I first read that line, I took it as an indication of how difficult it is to communicate the intricacies of sibling love to a group of strangers. When I read it a second time, I thought it might undermine most of the novel that's preceded it. Is Finn actually insane? Was his sojourn with Lily a fantasy, or a dream, or perhaps a metaphor for the metaphysical journey his brother is about to take? Was Lily herself nothing more than a "thought experiment," as she jokes at one point?

I'm not sure these questions can be answered definitively, and, more importantly, I'm not sure the answers matter. Present or absent, sane or not, Finn can no more know what his brother's last moments were like than he can know what it feels like to a zombie or a ghost. Death remains a mystery to the living, no matter how close they get to the dying or to the dead.

At Lily's funeral, Finn realizes that "all the people who had ever loved him" are gone. "And in feeling their absence he felt his own self pitted, burnished, caressed, then given a shove off a cliff," Moore writes. He contemplates joining the departed, thinking that no matter what the afterlife holds, he might be happier among those he knows. Instead, he resigns himself to living. He goes on dates; he returns to teaching. He also starts volunteering at a local hospice, where he holds the hands of strangers as they prepare to leave this world for another.

It's a quiet, discomfiting ending, and it lacks the consolation that Moore has provided in the past. There's no ecstatic dancing, no surprise reunion, no refuge taken in the body of another. (Finn dances awkwardly with Max's widow at the funeral, but he restrains himself from burying his face in her hair.) It's as if Moore is fresh out of compensatory tricks. Life is sad and lonely, she suggests; the people you love will abandon you, and you'll abandon them in turn. You end up living among strangers until it's your turn to leave. Reading the novel, I was reminded of a kind of refrain that comes up a few times in *Anagrams*: "Life is sad. Here is someone." Thirty-seven years later, it's time to update the sentiment: Life is sad. There's no one here. TNR

Maggie Doherty *is the author of* The Equivalents: A Story of Art, Female Friendship, and Liberation in the 1960s.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX NABAUM

Gone to Pieces

The plan to undermine democracy by creating thousands of privately ruled zones

By Andre Pagliarini

IN 1978, FROM a shiny metropolis off China's southern coast, a giddy Milton Friedman glimpsed the world as he thought it should be. "If you want to see how the free market really works," he told viewers of his PBS series, *Free to Choose*, "this is the place to come." He was speaking of Hong Kong, a place that had miraculously mined freedom and prosperity from "barren rock" through hard work, risk-taking, and a state "limited to its proper function"—a grim euphemism that Friedman meant as high praise.

At that time, Hong Kong was a British colony where residents had little say over their own affairs. Its powerful colonial governor was named almost 6,000 miles away by Queen Elizabeth, and only a portion of seats in the legislature were elected. In 1997, Hong Kong was returned to Chinese rule under a "one country, two systems" framework that was intended to preserve its economic advantages, but that did not bring democracy. This did not trouble free marketeers, who saw a high-tech industrial powerhouse, supposedly stripped of the irrational passions of mass politics and the nettlesome strictures of formal democratic procedure. As historian Quinn Slobodian puts it, it made an “impeccable vessel for commerce and finance—armored against the demands of the population but nimbly responsive to the demands of the market.” Why couldn’t everywhere be more like this?

Hong Kong today is among the most unequal places on Earth, but the Hong Kong model is thriving. As Slobodian traces in his incisive new book, *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy*, the world today is riddled with economic zones: places within countries that in one way or another have come to be roped off from the regulatory reach of national governments. In 1986, there were 176 such zones; by 2018, there were 5,400. Some are city-states or duty-free districts. A few “are no bigger than a factory or a warehouse,” while “others are urban megaprojects.” Zones don’t formally break off from the state, but they sidestep it. Each corporation that stashes its profits “in Switzerland or the Caribbean; each standoff over grazing rights with federal agents; each rent-a-cop, contractor, or mercenary hired to patrol, jail, or raid,” Slobodian writes, is “another small victory for the zone.”

The proliferation of zones is not just about economic growth. It’s part of a larger antisocial project deeply hostile to democracy. Market radicals have long seen liberal democracies as petty tyrannies whose taxes and regulations constrain the free flow of capital. Slobodian’s previous book, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, examined the creation of a global system designed to circumvent those constraints. But, as *Crack-Up Capitalism* traces, the ultimate goal was to chip away through elaborate means at the states themselves. Zones were the tool of choice. As Heritage Foundation analyst Stuart Butler wrote in 1982, “Localized freedom can rot the foundations of the unfree state around it.” The point of the zone, Slobodian explains, is “to pierce holes in the social fabric,” breaking up the bonds of solidarity within communities—as the wealthy hole up in gated communities, and workers come and go with no social safety net—and leaving the map in fragments.

ZONES ARE NOT an entirely novel form. As Slobodian points out, the city-state flourished in the Middle Ages; Genoa, Venice, and the City of London had their own governments, and, as in Hong Kong today, businesses could vote. But, in his account, the rise of the zone as we know it can be traced to the 1970s, when it appeared to offer “a sleek alternative to the messiness of mass democracy and the sprawl and bloat of unwieldy nation-states.” In an era of economic stagnation, when unemployment and inflation surged, zones appeared to have cracked the code to prosperity.

Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy
by Quinn Slobodian
Macmillan,
352 pp., $29.99

China began to replicate the Hong Kong model within its own borders in 1979, when Deng Xiaoping established four experimental Special Economic Zones to the north of Hong Kong in the Pearl River Delta, leading to the growth of the industrial powerhouse of Shenzhen. In the United States, Steve Savas, an official in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, proposed transforming New York City into a “Hong Kong on the Hudson.” And in the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher’s adviser Keith Joseph contemplated creating zones without taxation, labor laws, or health and safety regulations, but doing so in pockets of “inner city decay” instead of on literal islands. In her first year in office, Thatcher created the first of 11 enterprise zones.

Her most ambitious experiment with zones, however, was in London. Plans for the sleek glass complex known as Canary Wharf—and nicknamed “Hong-Kong-on-Thames”—were unveiled in 1985. The site for the new construction was London’s West India Docks, which was once the largest port in the world but had been hollowed out by containerization. After the docks finally closed in the 1980s, the area was earmarked for regeneration. But instead of a revitalized neighborhood for working people, there would rise a supercharged new financial district. The original plan included three of the tallest buildings in Europe and 10 million square feet of office space to accommodate the “vast floors of monitors and cooling systems” required in “the new age of ‘electronic banking.’”

The developers set their own rules: The London Docklands Development Corporation was empowered to “bypass local government, forgo the usual planning permission, and ignore the housing needs of residents.” When locals voiced their opposition—the Greater London Council warned of a future in which locals would be “porters and lavatory attendants for passing businessmen” and put forward an alternative plan—their concerns were waved aside. The LDDC’s first director in fact openly bemoaned what he called the “surplus population” of existing residents. (And in 1986, Thatcher’s government dissolved the troublemaking GLC.) Canary Wharf today is a private oasis for bankers, where low-paid cleaning staff have been banned from protesting.

New York City’s Hudson Yards, referred to as “Manhattan’s Biggest, Newest, Slickest Gated Community” by the *New York Times* architecture critic, is a more recent manifestation of the zone model, one that lavishes tax incentives and other privileges on wealthy investors willing to relocate to purportedly distressed areas. At least $1.2 billion of the financing to build Hudson Yards was obtained through the EB-5 visa program, a federal initiative that provides foreigners who invest heavily in U.S.-based projects a path to permanent residency in return. This program was supposed to direct resources to remote or economically distressed regions—though Manhattan’s West Side is neither remote nor distressed. Empire State Development, a New York state agency, got around this problem by cobbling together an enterprise zone out of “a serpentine line of census tracts from genuinely economically depressed areas,” thus opening the floodgates of EB-5 money. As Bloomberg’s Kriston Capps reported in 2019, “the mega-luxury of this mini-Dubai was financed in part through a program that was supposed to help alleviate urban poverty.” This kind of transactionalism is what Slobodian has in mind when he writes that enterprise zones function largely to “make what had been formerly called corruption into the law of the land.”

Hong Kong was far from the only model for new zones. In the late 1980s, Friedman and the Hoover Institution fellow Alvin Rabushka put together an index of the most “economically free” countries in the world. High on the list was Singapore. By the 1990s, Singapore had been undergoing steady economic growth at a rate unseen anywhere else, achieved through a combination of state-led internal development and a zealous drive to insert itself into high-end global supply chains. Unlike Hong Kong, Singapore is an independent nation with multiparty elections, though it is hardly a robust democracy: The watchdog Freedom House gives it a score of 19 out of 40 on political rights. A defining feature of its economy is the divide between citizens and the foreign workers who sustain the city-state's economy. "Being a Singaporean citizen means access to a range of services including a compulsory savings account that one could draw on for pension, health care, and to buy a home," Slobodian notes. "Being a foreign worker means you are not just hire-and-fire but fire-and-deport."

Despite its democratic deficit—or more probably because of it—Margaret Thatcher once suggested that Britain look not to Europe but to the East to reinvent itself as "a kind of free-trade and non-interventionist 'Singapore.'" More recently, Brexiteers fawned over Singapore as well. "If we are to thrive," Conservative MP Owen Paterson asserted in 2017, "our post-Brexit model should exactly be Singapore, a tiny country devoid of natural resources but with a booming economy and an average life expectancy of 85." *The Economist* gushed at the thought of London as "a sort of Singapore on steroids"—a vision of prosperity that has yet to materialize in the U.K., where the government warned of power outages last winter and supermarkets began to ration fresh fruit and vegetables earlier this year.

THE CREATION OF zones has not always meant gleaming towers and crowded ports. In South Africa, market radicals seized on apartheid policies to put the zone offense into action. Ciskei was one of several territories that the apartheid government designated a "homeland" for the Black population. Under this policy, Black South Africans were stripped of their citizenship and told they were citizens of these new pseudo-states instead; over 3.5 million people were forcibly relocated as a result. Seeing these developments, libertarians "hoped that the homeland could work as a kind of zone," Slobodian explains; with the help of "economists who believe in the power of markets, prices and incentives," it could become, depending which paper you consulted, the "African Hong Kong" or "Africa's Switzerland."

They got their chance to weigh in directly in 1984 when Ciskei's leader, Chief Lennox Sebe, put together a commission on economic policy. The head of the commission was Leon Louw, a South African inspired by Hong Kong, Friedman, and Friedrich Hayek. The model he proposed was the Export Processing Zone, which essentially created an internal offshore space with few regulations or rules to turn off investors. The strategy was to undercut countries like Taiwan by paying even lower wages. "This is like Taiwan 30 or 40 years ago: no competition, cheap labor," one investor enthused. Rapid industrialization followed, as did violent state coercion: "the would-be libertarian utopia operated hand in glove with the South African security forces," cracking down on dissent and any attempt at labor organizing.

In a similar instance of opportunism, market radicals also took an interest in war-torn Somalia in the 1990s. In that story, Michael van Notten, a prominent Dutch libertarian thinker and attorney whose claim to fame was the idea of the tax-free T-zone, would take the lead. Van Notten's signature scheme called for ending taxes in certain strategic locales to arouse what one economist called a "stimulating jealousy" in the surrounding area. In this way, lower taxation might spread by osmosis as communities raced to the bottom in order to remain competitive. In the Horn of Africa, he called for the creation of a society with no central government, ruled instead by judges rooted in the legitimacy of traditional Somali law. Individual Somali clans, as van Notten's Somali wife explained, would be able to profit from their "statelessness by opening areas within their tribal lands for development, inviting businessmen and professionals the world over to come to take advantage of the absence of a central government or other coercive authority."

Van Notten's misadventures would eventually lead to him being deported for taking part in a land transfer scheme gone awry. Africa would also provide the backdrop for yet another market radical proposal. Pitching the idea of charter cities, Stanford

Leaving Dante, Virgil Returns to Limbo

by Derrick Austin

Purgatorio, *XXX: 49-54*

i hold my face up to the light / you're taken by

the voice of a woman

i can't hear / pollen blows from trees

in ghost-shapes /

the light has changed

its color / dark stones

in the dark river / like fading fire

i descend / the poets walk me to where

light no longer lit the way

Derrick Austin *is the author of* Tenderness, *winner of the 2020 Isabella Gardner Poetry Award, and* Trouble the Water.

economist Paul Romer pointed to a map of the continent at night. Noting how little of it was illuminated, he lamented the “enormous amount of land on earth that’s very underutilized.” His plan called for rich countries to effectively take over unused swaths of poorer nations and create ideal conditions for capital to flourish. “This would be colonialism by consent,” Slobodian observes, “occupation by invitation.”

IN THE UNITED STATES, recent decades have seen the momentum of market radicalism moving west. Far from the ossified Eastern establishment, libertarians could work toward a stateless future in their own enclaves. A major part of this wide-ranging yet surreptitious effort lies in the construction of gated communities meant to facilitate retreat from the obligations of democratic society. Libertarians embraced such developments as showcases for polycentric law, a system of competing and overlapping legal institutions in which individuals and organizations can choose which they want to subscribe to. Different laws would apply to different people under different conditions. “This was what Hans-Hermann Hoppe called the ‘hierarchic-anarchic’ order of the medieval era,” Slobodian explains. For example, Sea Ranch, a gated planned community that sprung up in the 1960s along California’s northern coast, has long been ordered by a binding 56-page document called *The Sea Ranch Restrictions*. To violate its strictures on the height of trees or the colors of drapes was to risk fines or even the termination of member privileges.

It is easy to laugh off those who would want to live in such places. Their most fervent advocates often embrace frankly goofy ideas about the past, attempting to govern these private fiefdoms under a discrete set of paternalistic norms. But by the turn of the century, roughly half of new developments in the Western and Southern United States were carefully planned and walled off, many with their own private security forces. Over a similar period, many households also retreated from public education, turning to homeschooling: Roughly 20,000 children were being taught at home in the 1970s, compared with 1.7 million by 2016. Such living arrangements represent a hermetic ideal, escapist redoubts for those who reject rules and norms decided by a democratic collective.

Fantasies of opting out go beyond terra firma. Some libertarians look to settlements on the high seas to evade the reach of government. Others have looked to the internet: Balaji Srinivasan’s pitch for a “cloud country” presents a kind of micronation to be founded online and eventually manifested in the real world by individual users through discrete economic incentives. This novel state would emerge as an open-source project, its Founding Fathers hashing out the details on the web. “We cultivate in-person levels of civility,” Srinivasan mused, “we simulate architecture in VR, and we create art and literature that reflects our values.” A public dashboard would tally the number of members (citizens?)—“and perhaps their investments or fees,” Slobodian notes. At some later date, the purchase of physical territory could be crowdsourced. If citizenship as profile status does not arouse your civic passion, Srinivasan’s vision may not be for you.

Efforts like the sprawling myriad of gated communities, attempts to will new polities into being at sea and in the cloud, or Starbase—“a patch of land in Texas bought by Elon Musk to launch SpaceX rockets, which Musk also pictured as a community that would sustain future shuttles commuting to off-world settlements”—are only today’s most conspicuous efforts to undermine a shared civic space, materially and metaphorically. “We are being encouraged,” Slobodian argues, “to live in zones by those who profit most by our abdication from the shared set of responsibilities. A hundred years ago, the robber barons built libraries. Today, they build spaceships.”

THE RHETORIC THAT so often drives the creation of economic zones holds that individuals know best how to attain personal prosperity, and that they should be free of the meddlesome prerogatives of the state in pursuit of their own interests, for better or for worse. Even if it were true that most working people in Hong Kong, Somalia, Singapore, London, or Shenzhen were materially better off than their counterparts elsewhere—and it’s not clear that they are—there would still be the question of how to contend with the unequal distribution of power. Milton Friedman argued decades ago that the beauty of the Hong Kong model lay in its voluntary nature. Workers were supposedly free to enter and exit employment agreements based on their own calculations of what their labor was worth. Freer workers were happier workers.

The reality is much less romantic, as demonstrated 10 years ago in Singapore. The traffic death of an Indian construction worker in 2013 led to rioting that drew international attention to the abysmal living conditions of the South Asian, Chinese, Thai, and Burmese workers so crucial to Singapore’s narrative of economic success. And in Hong Kong, the Chinese government’s suppression of democracy activists has led to the most sustained protests in the city’s history.

There are glimmers of successful resistance. Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDEs) were foisted upon Honduras as a constitutional amendment after a coup in 2009. In 2021, a venture capitalist named Erick Brimen established a ZEDE on the Honduran island of Roatán and began work there on a charter city modeled after Hong Kong, Singapore, and Dubai. The city, which he called Próspera, would have a police force and its own legal system, which would treat crimes as mere “breaches of contract.” Government would be left to a set of corporate structures—a technical secretary, a limited liability company based in Delaware, and a group of trustees—rather than elected officials. The plans quickly drew opposition; Honduras has a long history of exploitation by foreign corporations, from U.S. banana companies to foreign-owned sweatshops, and the zones appeared to be yet another incursion. A National Movement Against ZEDEs and for National Sovereignty channeled the anger of ordinary people, and last year, after sustained protests, Honduras’s Congress unanimously revoked the status of ZEDEs altogether.

The case of Próspera is a reminder that zones are everywhere, but they are not inviolable. Those of us who don’t live in zones might think they don’t affect us, but the same ideas Slobodian outlines here have imbricated themselves into the very workings of globalized capitalism. A growing number of immiserated workers finding themselves with fewer and fewer ways to push back against exploitation are just one symptom. What is the Uberfication of the economy but an extension of the worker “freedom” Friedman celebrated in Hong Kong? The spirit of the zone is not contained within its deliberately narrow confines. The market radicals have designs upon us all.

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The Campus Culture War Con

How the right built a formidable machine for ginning up scandal in higher education

By Claire Potter

WHEREVER YOU GET your news, whether it is Twitter or *The New York Times*, you might reasonably imagine that higher education is awash in political conflict. You might see with dismay that progressive students are intolerant, hysterical, and fragile; or, depending on your sources, that right-wing students platform the vilest, most bigoted media personalities in the name of free speech. In these seemingly dystopian (and, as it turns out, semi-fictional) scenarios, coddled Gen Z'ers, backed by Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officers, respond to provocation by silencing conservative peers and disregarding academic freedom and free speech norms. Students across the ideological spectrum denounce faculty over political disagreements. And if liberal campus activists agitate nonstop for safe spaces and for trigger warnings on course materials, conservative kids claim they are not permitted to speak at all.

As you read these stories, you might ask: Where are the adults? The same outlets will tell you. When faculty aren't on a picket line or forcing students to self-censor to get a good grade, tenured radicals

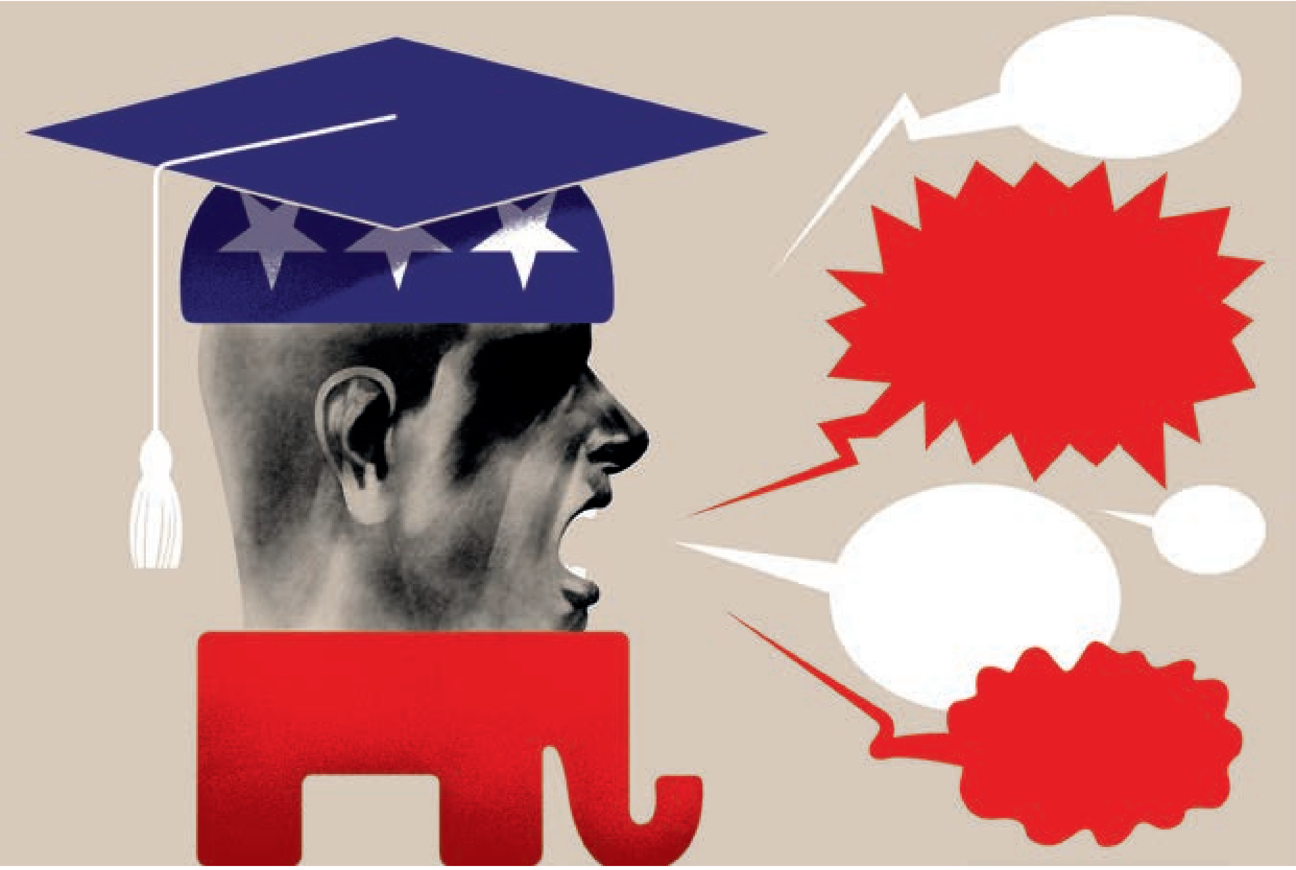

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDRÉ CARRILHO

(as Roger Kimball famously called us in 1990) eliminate traditional, fact-based humanities and social sciences course content in favor of critical theory that stigmatizes men, white Americans, heterosexuals, and people who identify with the gender binary. In the right-wing imagination, university administrators spend their days accusing local businesses of racism (see: the Oberlin bakery fiasco of 2016) and silencing campus conservatives.

High-profile conflicts over free speech and academic freedom are not exactly invented—but the larger narrative I just sketched is false. As Pennsylvania State University communications professor Bradford Vivian argues in *Campus Misinformation: The Real Threat to Free Speech in American Higher Education*, violations of decorum are comparatively rare, but the right has woven them into a dangerous meta-narrative about the fragility of First Amendment freedoms on campus. And the strategy has worked. Liberals and liberal media institutions are often so unsettled, and perhaps embarrassed, by events that position left-wing students as intolerant and illiberal that they have come to believe in a manufactured crisis.

As anyone who works in higher education knows, however, the thousands of classes, events, extracurriculars, and dorm conversations that make up most of daily life on a university campus normally occur without incident, whether students agree or disagree with one another. In their book *The Channels of Student Activism: How the Left and Right Are Winning (and Losing) in Campus Politics Today*, sociologists Amy J. Binder and Jeffrey L. Kidder recognize this reality and ask how students actually experience the campus culture wars fueling our nation's partisan divide. Their findings suggest that students across the political spectrum are generally more tolerant, more interested in diverse viewpoints and ideas, and more critical of their own political allies than assumptions about political polarization can account for.

But what both books show is that the right is better positioned to take advantage of the scandals—some provoked and others resulting from poor decisions—that do erupt. National student organizations are better at channeling students with conservative leanings into professional activism aimed at creating bad press for higher education. Right-wing media is so effective at seizing on and amplifying controversies, making sure that the distortions that proliferate on social media become the focus of higher education coverage, that mainstream news organizations are often just covering the coverage rather than investigating events. The networks that sustain the campus culture wars are not only powerful and well-financed; they operate far beyond campus.

CAMPUSES HAVE ALWAYS been targets for political attacks, and students, as Binder and Kidder contend, have always acted to assert "their vision of what American democracy should look like." In 1775, one student, a young Alexander Hamilton, held at bay a howling mob that was bent on violently seizing and expelling the Loyalist Tory president of King's College in Manhattan (now Columbia University). Hamilton's spellbinding revolutionary oratory allowed the frightened administrator to slip away and make his way to an English ship.

Although the classical educations favored by gentlemen and aspiring gentlemen prior to the late nineteenth century left little room for arguments about current affairs, it was still difficult to guard campuses from a disputatious, and often violent, American political culture. Between 1760 and 1860, students rioted repeatedly for their right to dissent from rules that they believed were unjust. Princeton, which prided itself on campus comity between Northern and Southern men in these years, kept the peace by banning political displays on campus. When war broke out in 1861, that agreement crumbled: Northern students took over the university's oldest building and hung the Union flag from it.

The Channels of Student Activism: How the Left and Right Are Winning (and Losing) in Campus Politics Today
by Amy J. Binder and Jeffrey L. Kidder
University of Chicago Press,
224 pp., $25.00

Campus Misinformation: The Real Threat to Free Speech in American Higher Education
by Bradford Vivian
Oxford University Press,
240 pp., $29.95

But political disputes did not harden into arguments over speech and academic freedom until the twentieth century. We can trace the rise of campuses as sites for conservative cultural anxiety to the publication of William F. Buckley Jr.'s *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom"* (1951). As Buckley charged, colleges had become not just dangerously progressive, but secular. Yale's curriculum, he argued, had reduced religion to an intellectual course of study that served few students. Courses were taught by nonbelievers, at least one of whom regarded faith as a "useful superstition." The criticisms stung, particularly because Buckley's book became a national bestseller. In February 1952, both in the wake of the book and amid Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks on educators, a committee of Yale alumni responded with an investigation into communism, irreligion, and academic freedom at the institution.

The charges, the committee concluded, were baseless. Yale had "no Communist on the faculty at the present time," and knew of no faculty who were "trying to undermine or destroy our society" or propagate "subversive theories." It discovered no instances of "intimidation" and found religious life "stronger than most places outside." Yale's business was "to educate, not to indoctrinate." Every student was "entitled to a fair presentation" of all knowledge, "so as to be able freely to make up his own mind. That is Yale's policy."

Today's academic culture wars are not so different from Buckley's attack on Yale and Yale's rebuttal, except in their ubiquity and intensity. Conservative critics now argue that liberal political indoctrination in education is a potent national security threat; that traditional religious values create a platform for a moral and truthful education; and that the free speech of conservatives is persistently threatened by liberal and left-wing groupthink. And liberals are consistently on the defensive.

WHAT BINDER AND Kidder learned in their research, however, is more complicated than what I just described. Yes, scandalous events that make national news reflect real political divisions on campus, and conservative students may well be anxious about being stigmatized for their views. A survey of freshmen at 147 U.S. colleges and universities, conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute in 2018, found that conservative students used their right to free speech less than other students. If two-thirds of leftist students and over half of liberal students claimed to have engaged in a form of public, political speech, only 41 percent of conservative and moderate students did.

And yet it is unclear why this is so, or whether this number reflects a problem educators ought to be concerned about. In 2022, Emma Camp, a student at the University of Virginia (one of the four campuses where Binder and Kidder did their research), wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* about students of all political persuasions who consistently refrained "from saying what we really think." Students feared the ostracism of their peers and even "lower grades if they don't censor themselves." But this may not be a liberal-conservative issue at all: Binder and Kidder found that left-wing students frequently disparaged *liberalism*.

There are also many institutions where conservatives can hardly claim to be on the back foot. For example, at Hillsdale College, a conservative, Christian school in Michigan, students study the classics, in "a supportive community dedicated to the highest things." Notably, the curriculum's focus on the archaic deliberately evades forms of intellectual conflict and modern critical theory that many conservatives find distasteful. Students who choose a curriculum that skirts thorny discussions about race, gender, sexuality, or contemporary social issues have also chosen an intellectual environment that is as cocooned—if not more so—as any right-wing caricature of an African American studies or feminist theory class at a more liberal university.

Conservative students who chose instead to attend liberal institutions, however, were often happy to encounter opposing views. While some told Binder and Kidder that college hadn't changed their outlook at all, others found that being challenged shifted their political positions. Some had come to prefer a populist conservatism over a traditional, corporate Republicanism, while others grappled with complexity and contradiction. "I feel like I'm more empathetic and more understanding of other people's viewpoints," one student said, explaining that classes with professors from the Middle East had caused her to rethink the right's animus toward Muslims. College did what it was supposed to do: It made students think and prepared them to live in a world where disagreement must be navigated.

Unsurprisingly, across political lines, students are not being indoctrinated: They make choices and, as Binder and Kidder put it, sort themselves across the different opportunities a campus offers. They have genuine interests that are supported by clubs and outside groups that offer real-world organizing experience (and résumé lines). But while these forces do not compel ideological conformity, they do play a role in "channeling" a subset of students into political identities and, to all intents and purposes, shaping them into professional activists.

The networks that sustain the campus culture war are not only powerful and well-financed; they operate far beyond campus.

AS IT TURNS out, however, conservatives are much better than liberals at recruiting and training students. Conservatives have "managed to build an elaborate, well-funded organizational space," Binder and Kidder write, "that galvanizes young supporters and grooms future leaders by pulling them outside the confines of campus" and into paid work that sets them up for postgraduation careers as movement conservatives.

These organizations also owe something to Buckley, who in 1960 created a group to spur young conservatives to action. Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) trained conservative students as organizers and networked them with their adult counterparts, much as Turning Point USA (TPUSA) or the now-regional meetings of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) do today.

Current campus groups, well-lubricated with outside money, are a function of YAF's early success and now constitute, as Binder and Kidder note, "a powerful external ecosystem" that trains and pays right-wing students to organize. National 501(c)(3) groups like TPUSA, PragerU, and CampusReform.org employ students to be soldiers in a social-media war against the "libs" and to protest campus diversity initiatives. Other groups, like the Goldwater Institute, Young Republican National Federation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation's Young Leaders Program, offer activism training, networking, and clear paths to political and policy careers.

Right-wing campus organizations do not just voice the concerns of their members. By goading progressive students, they deliberately incite conflict to create newsworthy events, stoking false narratives about liberal and left threats to free speech more generally. A frequent tactic is to invite controversial speakers to campus in order to provoke "liberal tears," or elicit emotional, attention-grabbing responses that can then be circulated on the internet. Protests at Milo Yiannopoulos's scheduled speech at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2017 spun out of control and became violent; but they were intended to stoke the anger of liberal and left students in the first place and provide visual evidence that "the left" are censors and bigots supported by activist administrators.

As Vivian argues, this strategy undercuts conservatives' insistence that "viewpoint diversity," or equal representation of conservative thought on campus, is their actual goal. The fact is that an event that must be shut down because the speaker cannot be heard, or because campus police cannot control an aggressive crowd of protesters, is far more useful to a national conservative organization than one that is peaceful, courteous, and civil. An almost infinite number of utterances, lectures, talks, performances, and casual exchanges occur on campuses across the United States every day without a single feather, left or right, being ruffled; we don't hear about them.

ABOVE ALL, CONSERVATIVE student organizations are currently outgunning liberal and left campus activism because conservatives are playing a long game that treats youth as junior partners in a larger political enterprise. They pay students more and invest heavily in campus culture wars as part of the larger battle to push the nation to the right. As Vivian notes, attacks on universities are part of a comprehensive set of "anti-education tactics" that tend to emerge "in periods of rising authoritarian sentiment."

Perhaps most significantly, "well-funded national organizations" have established clear and lucrative career paths for the campus conservatives they recruit. After graduation, conservative student activists can expect to move along to the Heritage Foundation or work in conservative media, Congress, and Washington Beltway political consulting. Well-funded campus jobs propel right-wing students from Campus Watch, TPUSA, and the campus youth publication Lone Conservative to the *Washington Examiner*, Breitbart, Real Clear Politics, and Project Veritas. The right's investment in media is not just about manufacturing misinformation about liberal elites and trolling ideological enemies: It's a pipeline to the larger misinformation world that influences elections. Students who pay their dues on campus may find themselves siphoned upward into a media organization, and from there to political consulting, congressional staffing, and running Super PACs.

Of course, progressive organizations recruit students, too, but not on this scale, and without the major events—like CPAC, where student activists go to résumé and interviewing workshops—that might help young liberal and left activists map a career.

The Mud Hole

by Rosanna Warren

The Mud Hole, we called it, the small dark pond
at the foot of the hill. Earth's eye, omphalos,
secret, canopied by maples, fringed
with brambles, but I knew how to pass
where grown-ups would never find me, perched
in the boughs of the scaly-barked ancestor tree.
A leaf-sprite flecked in shadows, I watched
the frog-rock shoot out its tongue to snag a fly,
the water snake slip through pickerelweed and swivel
in cursive across the murk, the turtle blink
and bask. Lost. Long gone. I climbed carefully down
into the future. Learned to speak human. But still
carry within me the iodine bottle's potion
of pond water, amber, foul, far too potent to drink.

Rosanna Warren*'s most recent books are* So Forth: Poems *and* Max Jacob: A Life in Art and Letters*.*

Despite the perception of college campuses as bastions of liberal intolerance, progressive students are also more identified with, and crucial actors in, campus diversity initiatives that buttress the reputation of institutions as tolerant and concerned with social justice. "Students on the left take classes with professors who produce frameworks for understanding social inequities" and negotiate with administrators to implement reforms, Binder and Kidder write. By airing grievances and staffing key student leadership positions, these activists come to embody the diversity initiatives that have shaped the higher education project more generally since the 1960s.

Yet the left lacks the support structures for activist students that the right has engineered over several decades. Whereas conservatives benefit from robust financing and tight networks, liberal, left, and moderate students seem to reflect the contentious and poorly coordinated nature of progressive networks and the fractured quality of left politics on and off campus. Binder and Kidder found that, as is often true in the Democratic Party, liberals and leftists were far less able than conservatives to agree on tactics or support one another in disagreement. Confrontational left tactics pushed one student whom Binder and Kidder interviewed to pay closer attention to conservative students' right to free speech, and to put "distance between himself and what he felt was the radical fringe."

Progressive students' political work is also less well-paid and does not offer "a clear path with identifiable steps for converting their activism into an occupation." The so-called liberal media, whether corporate or nonprofit, does not have a pipeline from campus activist groups, and largely lacks the deep-pocketed donors that conservative media organizations have. A reporter coming out of a campus media organization and starting at Breitbart can expect to earn more than $65,000 a year, while a journalist aspiring to work for *The Nation*, a historically progressive outlet, can hope for an internship that pays $18 per hour.

THE CAMPUS CULTURE war is playing out in large part off campus: primarily, in the media. Vivian traces how skirmishes at elite colleges get pumped into a vast right-wing outrage machine aimed squarely at higher education. A campus stringer takes a surreptitious video or an incautious social-media post of a professor or campus event and posts it to a small site like Campus Watch or Legal Insurrection with an incendiary headline. From there, it will be reposted to conservative and mainstream social media by a network of campus operatives, where it will be picked up by conservative pundits, bloggers, and politicians. In this way, controversies siphon upward from clickbait sites to Fox News, and on into politically moderate sites like *The New York Times*. Over time, these manufactured scandals have come to dominate our national conversation about not just higher ed but also K-12 curricula.

Conservatives are playing a long game that treats youth as junior partners in a larger political enterprise. They pay students more and invest heavily.

Many of these controversies are, or should be, of little interest to most people who don't attend those colleges. A recent nonbinding referendum by students at Wellesley College, historically a women's school, to admit transgender men as first-year students and stop referring to students as "women" became a national news story anyway, in part because of outsize concern about the small number of transgender students on college campuses and the GOP's fixation on the gender binary.

If such a story pushes a larger right-wing narrative and characterizes elite, liberal institutions as out of touch, it also drives traffic for liberal outlets like *The New York Times*, NPR, and *The Washington Post*. As Vivian describes it, misinformation is rarely a question of actual falsehoods, but of "a cynical campaign to spread wild overgeneralizations and unempirical stereotypes about higher education, not sound journalism." When a new Oberlin College teaching resource guide suggested that "trigger warnings" be added to course syllabi in 2014, major outlets leaped on the story as if discussions about pedagogy on a few campuses indicated national malaise. "WARNING, COLLEGE STUDENTS: THIS EDITORIAL MAY UPSET YOU," the editors of the *Los Angeles Times* snickered, while *The New York Times* cited fears that new rules would leave faculty too "terrified" of students to teach.

In this way, the right's favorite controversies are only a few degrees of separation from becoming liberal causes, too. Furthermore, they no longer emanate from well-spoken reactionaries like Buckley; instead, they pour forth from clickbait garbage and extremist podcasts, huge moneymakers on the right. Consider, for example, professional troll Matt Walsh's recent podcast episode titled "Princeton Professor Tries to Debunk Biology, Fails Hilariously," or Christopher Rufo's "investigation" of the Gender and Sexuality Center at the University of Texas at Austin, which—unsurprisingly—revealed that this student resource is "taxpayer-funded insanity." These commentaries on education may be free speech, but they aren't ideas—only stunts intended to promote disdain for the academic project.

These provocateurs do not just needle students: They are beginning to reshape education itself. Rufo, a man with no higher-ed background beyond a Georgetown bachelor's degree and a little time cooling his heels at the Harvard Extension School, was recently appointed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis to the board of New College, a famous progressive public college in Florida. So far, the new board has fired the president and replaced her with a politician, denied tenure to five faculty who had previously been approved, hired a Christian athletic director to establish an intercollegiate athletic program, and adopted a "classical and Christian" admissions test favored by homeschooled students.

CAMPUS CULTURE WARS have set the stage for larger and more comprehensive attacks on education. DeSantis has declared a "war on woke" that, in the name of protecting students in pre-K through college, has imposed long-standing restrictions on subjects that can be taught in taxpayer-funded education. Crying ideological indoctrination, DeSantis and other governors have signed laws that make the discussion of gender and sexuality at school almost impossible, and call the acknowledgment of racism in American history a form of emotional abuse. In their wake, schools have excised titles by young adult author Judy Blume, Nobel Prize–winner Toni Morrison, and Kurt Vonnegut from K-12 curricula. A middle school teacher in Lee County, Florida, claims that she was fired for telling her students that she is attracted to people of all genders, and a teacher in Duval County was fired after posting a video on social media showing the empty shelves of a school library after administrators ordered non-curriculum books removed from classrooms.

Like other forms of political and social revanchism, these are serious attempts to return education in the United States to a nonexistent past. In that fictional land, students studied classic texts; accepted the guidance of adults about sex, race, and gender; and left critical thought about the world at the schoolhouse door.

Both of these books deliver a powerful corrective to the idea that higher education needs this kind of rescue. Campuses are already intellectually diverse. Students on the right and the left are far more thoughtful and actively engaged in the process of learning from one another than sensational media stories give them credit for. And even when challenged by intentional provocations, and channeled into partisan and activist organizations, they aren't fragile, they listen to one another, they change, and they become more thoughtful.

When major media outlets generalize about the state of higher education from sensational incidents in a way that stigmatizes liberal students and faculty, they aren't covering the news: They are unintentionally collaborating with well-funded conservative operatives, not to expand freedom of expression and thought on campus, but to engulf colleges and universities in partisan politics.

Claire Potter *is the author of* Political Junkies: From Talk Radio to Twitter, How Alternative Media Hooked Us on Politics and Broke Our Democracy.

GREG ENDRIES/HBO MAX

Almost Famous

The Other Two understands the strangeness of social-media stardom.

By Phillip Maciak

THE THIRD-SEASON PREMIERE of *The Other Two* closes on an image of pure loneliness: Cary Dubek's face illuminated only by the light of his iPhone. This was supposed to be a moment of triumph. Cary (Drew Tarver) is an aspiring actor who's been struggling to make it for two seasons. At the beginning of the episode, he was finally on the verge of breaking through. He starred in a movie of his own during the pandemic—a ghastly looking VOD drama called *Night Nurse*, co-starring Edie Falco and Beanie Feldstein—and was about to screen it.

But nothing went to plan. First, the theater that was supposed to host the premiere was sold literally mid-screening and turned into a Starbucks, then his home watch party was foiled because Cary couldn't remember his Hulu password. Ultimately, Cary settles for voyeurism, watching a neighbor watch the film in the privacy of his living room, as if Norma Desmond were starring in *Rear Window*. The episode ends with one long, silent shot of Cary alone in bed, scrolling through mentions of *Night Nurse* on Twitter. It is an anticlimax, not just for the film premiere, but for Cary's whole career. If this is success, why does it feel so uneventful? For a show that's frequently about the surreal excesses of celebrity culture, it's a surprisingly grounded, even relatable moment. A lonely figure, searching for himself online, trying hard not to fall asleep.

In many ways, this is the kind of defeat *The Other Two* is made of. The show, created by former *SNL* writers Chris Kelly and Sarah Schneider, revolves around Cary and his sister, Brooke (Heléne Yorke), and their awkward position as a pair of also-rans, the two thirtysomething siblings to a Bieberesque pop star, who goes by the name Chase Dreams. When their little brother suddenly gets very famous in the show's 2019 debut, Brooke and Cary enter a world of showbiz cartoons, from the soulless record exec Shuli (Wanda Sykes) to doofus-genius manager Streeter (Ken Marino). Their mom (a career-best Molly Shannon) greets her youngest child's good fortune with an interminable "say yes" attitude; she, too, gets famous when she rides Chase's wave and starts her own hit daytime talk show. Cary and Brooke look on with mingled disgust and desire. All of these people are delusional narcissists; oh, to be one of them!

But *The Other Two* has never just been a send-up of the celebrity-industrial complex. Moments of intimate longing and despair like Cary's bedtime scroll stand out amid the whirl of fame-hungry antics. Because this is also a show about millennials looking desperately for love and acceptance, the slippage between who we are in private and who we are in public, and the easy satisfaction of always thinking the worst of other people. In other words, *The Other Two* has always been about social media.

CHASE ISN'T JUST a star; he's a *viral* star. Part of the reason that Cary and Brooke are caught so off guard by their brother's meteoric rise is that it happens almost entirely online, with all the speed and ghostliness the internet provides. His fame feels unreal, almost theoretical. There are no album signings, no live shows, and Chase—as we eventually learn—can't even sing. There's just a viral video called "Marry U at Recess," an unholy number of "likes," and a whole lot of money pouring in.

But that's just where it starts. Social media is the lens for a lot of the show's biggest bits and even plotlines. It is, just as in life, omnipresent, and so, even as the show spotlights the inherent ridiculousness of the extremely online, it also understands the way social media is a deranging accelerant of everyday problems, and thus a medium of everyday life. Brooke befriends an Instagram cosmetics influencer, not realizing that she's only 11 years old, because her makeup is so thick and garish. Chase's second single, "My Brother's Gay," draws unwelcome attention to Cary, but, after Countess Luann from *Real Housewives* posts an emotional response to the video, Shuli informs Cary that's he's officially become "camp," and a colleague pops champagne: Chase will "live on forever in the gay community ... as a joke." There's a band of recurring characters called "The Instagays," who reappear every season, having wholly reinvented their personalities—they go to pool parties, they flip houses, they pose in Speedos in a church—to optimize engagement on their influencer accounts. Shuli tries to send Chase's ex-girlfriend to an off-the-grid compound in the wilderness to prevent her from being doxed by Chase's fans. Cary records a video for somebody on Cameo and then awkwardly crashes their birthday party; he uses Grindr to determine the ethical ramifications of joining a homophobic church for clout; he gets into a Twitter firestorm when he voices the first openly gay character in a Disney film; his publicist stages an intervention because he's posting about his movie too much.

These are all just a bunch of funny jokes about people who are too online, celebrities whose shallow fame exists only by way of the apps, and a contemporary American culture hypnotized by the blue light of screens. But each of these incidents also reveals a little of the deeper personalities these fragile people try to transform or express or hide. The "My Brother's Gay" saga addresses Cary's discomfort with expressing his sexuality in public, which goes back to the painful memory of his recently deceased father's disapproval. Brooke's desperation to be seen leads her to become blind to her tween friend's true identity. Everybody, everybody is so, so lonely.

IN HER BOOK *The Drama of Celebrity*, the scholar Sharon Marcus argues that celebrity, as we know it, is a cultural phenomenon with three distinct authors. There's the celebrity, who expresses themself through whatever art or product they make; there are the journalists who write about and photograph and criticize and otherwise construct the celebrity's public image; and then there's the public, who contribute devotion and imagination, and money, and love and hate. For Marcus, no single one of these authors does it alone. The star begins to burn at the convergence point between those three forces.

In this framework, social media is the perfect cauldron for the witches' brew of celebrity. But it also allows ordinary people, civilians, to experience some boutique version of the dissociation and detachment from reality that's long been the most famous side effect of fame. There was a time when Marilyn Monroe emerged as an illusion, a trick of the light produced between herself, her studio's massive press apparatus, and an adoring and vampiric public. Today, anyone can be an illusion like this, if at smaller scale.

The Other Two really understands this parallel. Its screen time obsession isn't just a layer of timely jokes about millennial distraction and vacuousness. Social media is the way that this show about big, dumb stars becomes a show about ordinary, dumb people. The show both mirrors and skewers the grotesqueries of online life. It "dunks" on its characters, scoring points off of their vulnerabilities in a way that should seem familiar to Twitter users: Streeter revealing his Sublime-style belly button tattoo is somehow both hilarious and depressing. The show reproduces the toxicity that's become the hallmark of social media, but then it also works, bit by bit, to counteract it.

In this new season, for instance, Brooke's arc revolves around her ambivalence about celebrity and the pressure of pandemic-era social-media virtue signaling. Over the course of the show, she becomes Chase's co-manager. She loves it, but she also understands that the industry she works in is callow and exploitative. During the pandemic, she watches seemingly all her friends and acquaintances rededicate themselves to "doing good"—while posting about it constantly, of course—as she burrows further and further into her work in the belly of the beast. And so, despite achieving her own showbiz dreams, she's once again left feeling like everybody's moved on without her.

But just because Brooke and Cary see themselves as the center of the universe, that doesn't mean the show agrees. While *The Other Two* is always scorched-earth with its satirical targets, and its portrait of the industry is astringently unflattering—in one episode, industry people literally can't see or hear nonindustry guests at a party—it never really gives up on anybody. Indeed, one of the show's greatest strengths is its commitment to fleshing out and taking seriously its side-characters. No one is a better example of this than Brooke's on-again, off-again boyfriend, fan favorite Lance (Josh Segarra).

In the first season, Lance is Brooke's loser boyfriend, who is always pitching harebrained ideas for custom sneakers. He's the type of guy—earnest, guileless, not self-aware—who makes an easy target for mockery, online or off. Over the course of the first two seasons, though, the show starts to train its gaze on Lance's relentless, unflappable positivity. What began as a joke became a curiosity, and, slowly—with the help of Segarra's on-screen magnetism and puppylike physical expressivity—Lance has become something like the show's moral center.

This season, Brooke is at odds with Lance because his seeming goodness—he quit the world of high fashion to become a nurse during the pandemic—makes her feel bad about her own choices. When this simmering conflict comes to a head, Segarra delivers a showstopping monologue. He manages, somehow, to hold on to the daft eccentricity that makes his character such a comedic high point of the show, while absolutely ripping that character's chest open. It's a baffling feat for this character to essentially rage, on-screen, about the idea that anyone ever thought he was just there for comic relief.

Again and again the audience is denied the pleasure of simple mockery. Cary's love interest this season is a buzzy young actor who stays in character 24 hours a day for his roles. It's a clever little dig against method acting, but the show holds the bit long enough for the joke to end up on Cary. Sure, this guy's being ridiculous, but Cary's the one who's decided to be in a long-term relationship with a man he's never really met. The show by no means wants to redeem the industry, but, this season especially, it's become invested in exposing the lazy nihilism that can come along with seeing the worst in people. If you run into a craven, soulless industry hack in the morning, you ran into a craven, soulless industry hack; if you run into them all day, you are the craven, soulless industry hack.

Ultimately, just like social media, and just like celebrity, *The Other Two* is about identity. It's a flimsy, fungible thing, and it's a trap. It's a point of pride and a point of embarrassment. There's the real you that we all struggle to find and to express truthfully; there's the version of yourself that you perform for the public; there's the version of you that others create in and against their own image. This is true for Kim Kardashian, it's true for Chase Dreams, it's true for Cary and Brooke Dubek, and for you and for me. This extremely funny, surprisingly moving show understands that truth. There's you, and then there's the other two. TNR

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Res Publica

by Win McCormack

Black Cat or White Cat

Which will catch the most mice?

At the beginning of Mao Zedong's reign, China was a poor, underdeveloped country with a shallow industrial base. Mao's Great Leap Forward Campaign of 1958–1961 was intended to increase food production dramatically while creating a credible industrial base for the country. It turned out to be a horrifying fiasco, resulting in the deaths from hunger of millions of Chinese peasants. Five years later, Mao instigated what came to be called the Cultural Revolution, whose avowed purpose was to purge the nation of all remaining elements of feudalism and capitalism. The Cultural Revolution, though not quite as horrific as the Great Leap Forward, resulted in the deaths of as many as 1.5 million Chinese people during its 10-year span of 1966–1976.

ANDREW BURTON/GETTY

Mao feared that the group he called the "Capitalist Roaders" would come to the fore after he died, and that is what happened. The new leaders of the Chinese Communist Party made a conscious decision to go down that road, partway at least, after Mao's passing, in order to begin modernizing the country's economy in a serious, systematic way. Poised between socialism and capitalism, Deng Xiaoping, who was installed in 1978 as the first leader under the new system of limited 10-year terms, is famous for his quip on this subject: "Black cat or white cat, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat." Propelled by Deng's reforms, the Chinese economy by 2010 had displaced Japan's as the world's second largest.

Deng largely dismantled the system of centralized planning China had adopted from the Soviet Union in favor of relying on market forces for economic development, and he opened China to investment from the outside world. These changes were bound to produce a cadre of extravagantly wealthy entrepreneurs, and so they did. China, a purportedly Communist country, was suddenly known for housing more billionaires within its borders than any other nation on the planet except the United States. The most well-known of this cadre, inside and outside China, was (and almost certainly still is) Jack Ma. Ma was a former English teacher who in 1999 created an e-commerce site in his apartment in Hangzhou that he named Alibaba, meant to serve as a global digital marketplace. In 2004, Ma created Alipay, a third-party mobile-phone and online payment system, said to be used by roughly 70 percent of China's population. It has been accused of disrupting China's financial system.

By 2014, Ma was able to list Alibaba on the New York Stock Exchange. The listing held the record for the world's largest initial public offering, or IPO, from then until 2019. Ma's even bigger enterprise, Ant Group, was originally launched as an escrow service to facilitate the payment transactions of Alibaba's online marketplace. Ma had split Alipay off from Alibaba and incorporated it into the more commanding entity of Ant. He raised three rounds of private capital for the venture, and by mid-2018 the company was seen as the world's most valuable startup.

With a view to placing Ma's IPO for Ant in Shanghai and Hong Kong (and not New York), the company made its finances public for the first time. The same details that excited would-be investors—the consumer loan portfolio that surpassed that of every state-owned bank in the country, an annual payments total exceeding China's GDP—worried the bank regulators in Beijing, who had been yearning to regulate privately owned companies more carefully. In advance of Ant's IPO, Ma addressed a business conference in Shanghai in October 2020, attended by highly placed bank regulators and other government officials, including China's vice president, a central bank governor, and several other senior state-bank officials. In his speech, Ma criticized Beijing's efforts to minimize financial risks. "There is no systemic risk in China's financial system," he asserted. "Chinese finance has no system." He attacked the bank regulators, saying that they had "only focused on risks and overlooked development." He critiqued Chinese bank regulators for having a "pawnshop mentality." Officials in Beijing were outraged.

When President Xi Jinping got wind of what Ma had said, he ordered the immediate halt of Ant's IPO. At a meeting of the Financial Stability and Development Committee, headed by Xi's top economic czar, Liu He, the group decided to "put all kinds of financial activities under regulation and [treat] the same business in the same way." Subsequently, the government made the rule even tougher, requiring firms such as Ant to fund at least 30 percent of each loan in conjunction with a regular bank. But the whole point of Ma's critique of the prevailing Chinese banking system was that its structure was antiquated and unable to provide the liquidity needed by both individual Chinese consumers and innovative companies such as Alibaba and Ant.

Some observers, however, did not believe Xi's feelings in this matter were limited to the attitude and behavior of a single egomaniacal entrepreneur. A September 20, 2021, *Wall Street Journal* article carried the headline "XI JINPING AIMS TO REIN IN CHINESE CAPITALISM, HEW TO MAO'S SOCIALIST VISION." In it, reporter Lingling Wei suggested that Xi was bent on curtailing or even reversing the capitalist reforms that had made China the second-largest economy in the world by GDP. Wei wrote that, in Xi's opinion, private capital now had been "allowed to run amok, menacing the party's legitimacy." The supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party had been compromised, Xi thought, and needed to be restored. At the same time, a robust capitalist sector was essential to maintain the loyalty of the populace to the regime. Could Xi reconcile these apparently clashing goals? Mao held that there were two kinds of contradictions—"nonantagonistic" ones that could be peacefully resolved, and "antagonistic" ones that could only be resolved through violence. In which kind of contradiction was Xi, and China, becoming enmeshed?

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